

# Insiders or Outsiders? Pastoral Care with Christian Gay Women in a Methodist Congregation

by

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Declaration

I, Deborah Jane van de Laar, declare that **Insiders or Outsiders? Pastoral Care with Christian Gay Women in a Methodist Congregation** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references



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Signature

27 November 2003

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## Abstract

This qualitatively oriented Practical Theology research project was based on a narrative inquiry into the spiritualities of six gay women who are related to Northfield Methodist Church, which is situated in Benoni, Gauteng. These conversations occurred within a small group context, and were aimed at co-authoring preferred ways of being both gay and Christian. Toward the end of the research journey, I asked each participant to prepare a written text that would summarise their experience of being simultaneously gay and Christian, so that by hearing their own stories of their journey, they would be able to find a voice. As these women are usually marginalised in the Methodist Church, I invited various groups to audience their stories. This research report records the beginning of my journey into working towards the complete acceptance of gay and lesbian Christians into the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

**Key Terms:** Christian spirituality, narrative approach, being gay, Practical Theology, social construction discourse, reflexivity, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), DEWCOM (Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee of the MCSA).

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introducing the Research Story**

#### **1.1 The Context Within Which The Research Story Emerges**

##### *1.1.1 South African Gay Liberation*

1994 was a watershed year in the life of all South Africans. Not only did the new democracy bring political freedom to all people of this land, but the new constitution also brought rights to many who had never experienced the protection they offer. Not least of these marginalized groups were the gay community. As gay people began to be allowed to live more open lives, so the church was faced with a previously hidden crisis: what do we say to our gay brothers and sisters who would like to experience the same acceptance in the church as the state offers?

Voices both within and outside the variety of religious institutions in South Africa are challenging faith communities to take the need for gay and lesbian Christian spirituality very seriously. For example, there is an emergence of churches, like those from the Reforming Church in Muckleneuk and Irene, which conduct ceremonies for gay couples to celebrate their union. As a result, couples connected to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (hereafter referred to as the MCSA), are challenging Methodist Churches to marry gay people because the churches in Irene and Muckleneuk are doing so. As couples approached (and continue to approach) ministers to bless their same sex unions, ministers turned to the MCSA leadership for guidance. Aware that the majority of Christians believe homosexuality to be 'a sin', many ministers also realise that many people in same sex relationships feel the need to 'leave the church to become whole' (Shallenberger 1994b:142). Some of those ministers silently, but routinely, offer services of blessing for people in same sex relationships. At the same time, other ministers, fearing that a loss of 'standards', or morality in the church would not be helpful to the church's witness, will neither bless these relationships, nor allow

them a place in the leadership of church life. In response to this call for guidance from these ministers, and mandated by Conference (the highest decision making body in the MCSA) to begin to explore the issue, the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee of the MCSA (hereafter referred to as DEWCOM) put together an initial draft paper which they presented to Conference 2001 (DEWCOM 2001). This paper was rejected, as a result of debate on the floor of Conference. Although the document was deeply compassionate, it ended by differentiating between the orientation of gay people and their practice, and expressed a 'love the sinner, but hate the sin' stance. Some ministers at the Conference expressed their dissatisfaction with the dualism of this conclusion (see Germond & De Gruchy 1997:188,203), and so the document was rejected. However this task team was requested to research the issue further, and then return to Conference 2003 with a new document, which could guide all Methodist ministers, and in fact all Methodist people, in their dealings with people in same-sex relationships.

### *1.1.2 The Challenge Facing the Church*

M T Hammond (2000:1) describes a neglected group of Christians: those whose firsthand encounters with Christianity have been negative, painful and alienating, and because of this significant wounding have left the church or 'lost their faith'. These folk are leaving the church in Europe and the USA at a rate of 6 000 a day. Among those most alienated by the church are people whose sexual orientation is anything other than heterosexual. In fact Shallenberger's (1994b:139) research shows that it is spiritually advantageous to many gay and lesbian people to be estranged from the church, for often only then are they able to reclaim their faith in ways that are congruent with what they know of themselves.

The Methodist Church of SA does not at the moment have a policy with regard to gay issues, beyond their virtually unanimous support to the foundational conviction that as a church 'we are to be a community of love rather than rejection' (DEWCOM 2003:2). This guiding belief is based on watching the ways in which Jesus, especially in the gospel of Luke, included marginalized people, like lepers, women and children. On 'the ground', however, amongst the lay people as well as amongst many of our ministers, there is widespread belief that homosexuality is 'perverted', and that gay people are in the same camp as paedophiles or prostitutes. The broader leadership of the MCSA appears to fall anywhere in between the poles of total acceptance, and complete rejection. These varied positions obviously reflect a variety of theologies that have led us to these

conclusions. As the MCSA, therefore, our obvious task is to reflect on this praxis, in order that we can **do** the theology that our congregations are asking us to do (Guitterez 1988:12). This research is an attempt to carefully consider the context and experiences of a group of Christian gay women at one particular Methodist church, before we attempt to begin the journey into the development of a Christian gay theology. I believe that this research is the beginning of what must necessarily be a careful and perhaps even slow process, as we allow our stories to intersect, to have congruency, with the stories of the bible (Peterson 1993b: 128 –139).

## **1.2 Personal Reasons for Choosing a Narrative Exploration into Christian Gay Spirituality.**

As I have said, I have always loved stories. It was through listening to an adult share a story that lead to my choice to become a Christ follower. It was through reading the stories of other children, and their experience of faith that helped me to forge my own walk with God at a very young age. And it has been through listening to the stories of people and their struggles with their sexuality that has lead to my need to enter this research. I had heard that 'God' sometimes did heal people, changing them from being homosexual, to becoming heterosexual. Encountering painful stories like that of Ann Amideo (1999) in her article released on 'The Other Side' web page *The Odd Christian Out*, helped me to see that sometimes no matter how committed gay people are to 'being healed' of homosexuality (that is, by becoming hetero-sexual) God sometimes simply does not 'change' them. But she showed me that healing can come to Christian gay people in other, different ways, like through acceptance of their sexual orientation. Hearing Mel White (Jan/Feb 98:5) say in his *Bringing in the beloved community* that he's 'received fifty thousand letters telling true, painful stories of how anti-gay rhetoric and political action lead directly and indirectly to suffering and death', helped me to believe that by listening to the stories of gay women, I could help to bring different ways of healing to and with them.

### ***1.2.1 My personal spiritual journey with gay issues***

I think that my journey in gay issues began in 1987 when my brother finally 'came out' to me. I am honoured that he chose me to be the first in the family to hear that he was gay. I wish I could have that moment again. At that stage I had met a few gay people (all of whom I liked), but as I had, at that stage, chosen a fundamentalist faith practice, I really believed that gay people were 'in sin'. If the bible, in Leviticus 20:13 said that is an 'abomination' for 'a male to lie with a male',

then I believed it. I believed that if the Bible were to be the standard for my behaviour, then my behaviour, and the behaviour of anyone who confessed to being Christian, had to conform to it, not the bible to my experience. Although I hadn't rejected my brother, I had told him that I believed that God accepted the sinner, but not the sin. I believed that the homosexual person both could and should be 'healed' (and evidence this by developing a heterosexual identity), and that only heterosexual relationships are 'God ordained' as Cassidy 1998:1 explains. Not surprisingly, my brother was not particularly interested in my faith!

For years I continued to hold the same views, finding them supported by such writers as Davies and Rentzel (1993), and later by Paulk, J and Paulk, A (1999), and Cassidy (1998). In the meantime, I came to reject this deeply conservative fundamental faith practice (as described in the paragraph above), and returned to the Methodist church. In 1996 we met a group of women from the group 'Love in Action' who shared their experiences of being 'saved' from homosexuality. While with them, I grew in compassion, amazed at the lengths to which people would be prepared to go to be free of this painful experience. While both of the women were deeply sincere, devoted followers of Christ (two have recently candidated for the ministry), my doubts about God's judgemental perception of them began to worry me. As recently as last year these women sent a 'Love in Action' article to the Bishop of our district, together with a copy of Focus on the Family's research into homosexuality called *Setting the Record Straight*. In this Burtoft (1993: 82-87) states that that homosexual desire is 'caused' by a failure to develop a healthy and mature sense of 'appropriate gender-activity' and that homosexuality is 'not good' as it weakens the family.

By then I had begun to read. I had come across the book *Aliens in the Household of God* (Germond & De Gruchy 1997), and was interested to see that in it, a university friend of mine had shared his experience of being both gay and being a minister. Together, my husband (who is also a Methodist minister) and I began to debate the issue more thoroughly. In the process we found many allies in the Methodist church who were able to further our thinking, give us more to read and provide hope for the pain I saw my gay friends living in. Since then, I have met more and more gay people who love Jesus. I have walked through the pain of a gay Methodist minister having to leave the church (Croucamp 2003). My admiration of gay people in the church is great, and I long to make the church a 'safe' place for them. When looking at the pain the church's restrictive practices

cause gay people, I concur with McCall Tigert (1996: xv) when she asks 'Why bother with the Christian Church?' Nonetheless, I suspect that her experience is matched by that of many gay people within the church; that while her local church is the locale of her most 'healing, hope-filled, spiritually connected, profound moments of [her] life within the community of faith, the body of Christ,' it is also the place where she experienced the 'most painful alienating, demoralising, scary moments and sad moments...' (McCall Tigert 1996: xv).

Wink's article (1999) *Homosexuality and the Bible*, which explores the sexual mores of biblical times in comparison to our own times, as well as our inconsistency in applying sexual mores, did more to change me than any other. Realising that God is on the side of the powerless, and that abolitionists had to struggle against the *biblical* sanction of slavery (and patriarchy) led me to a need to name hetero-sexism as not only communal pain, but also communal sin (Marshall 1994).

As a woman in ministry, I stand on the shoulders of many women and men who have worked hard at freedom, so that I could be admitted to the ministry. I owe them a great debt. There are only two ways in which I can thank them. I can be the best woman minister I am capable of being, and I can join the ranks of those who are working to expand the freedom of others. I have chosen to work to expand the freedom of people in same sex relationships. I long for the church to be a place where their gifts are developed for the benefit of the wider church, where we solemnise their vows of faithful partnership, where we baptise their babies, and bury their dead. I long to see same-sex ministers in the church, ministering to heterosexual and gay people equally. McCall Tigert (1996:xxiii) says 'the body of Christ cannot be well as long as one member suffers'. I long for these particular suffering 'outsiders' to become 'insiders' (Germond & de Gruchy 1997:203) and this research has given me the opportunity to take this step.

### *1.2.2 My work as a minister in a local congregation*

I am one of five ministers of a large Methodist Church in Benoni, Gauteng. I am proud that we do have openly gay individuals and couples in our congregation. Despite the general 'gay alienation' from pastoral care in the wider church that I described earlier (Eliason 1997:164), I am glad to say that the research participants with whom I participated generally reported positive experiences of pastoral care they received from the ministers of our church. Amongst the

congregation and lay leadership, however, the experience has been different. While the gay women have never experienced any kind of 'persecution', one couple have not been allowed to exercise the kind of leadership that they are so clearly capable of within a cell group. This is because the church leadership has adopted the need to differentiate between 'being and doing homosexuality', and feel that they cannot 'compromise the teachings of the church' (Coleman 1995:163). Their constant pain is a spur to my action.

I believe that it is my function to educate, guide and care for the people of my congregation. I believe that this education must be done slowly and carefully. I want to encourage the congregation to become 'inclusive' generally (with regards homosexuality, but also to race and gender, as well as with regards to physical and mental disability), so that the work I do with gay issues infiltrates many other areas of church life. When I am frustrated by the slowness of people to come to the same place of acceptance of same sex relationships as I do, I have to remind myself of what a long, slow journey it was for me to come to the place that I am. When the pain of confronting these leaders, and their discomfort in their own faith as a result, tempts me to stop challenging them, the pain of my gay sisters and brothers forces me to continue on the road of transformation. I am reminded by McCall Tigert (1996:54) that '[h]ad the Israelites waited until the Egyptians were comfortable with change, we would still be slaves'.

I also believe that I need to be very pro-active in terms of pastorally caring for gay people. Mixon (1997: 164) speaks of the alienation many gay people experience in/from pastoral care. In the Methodist church, because some of our homosexual members find the words 'gay' or 'lesbian' too value-laden, as ministers we have begun to talk about gay people as people who are in 'same sex relationships'. This terminology is an act of pastoral care. As a ministry team, we have tried very hard to make pastoral care a positive experience for all people, especially those in 'same sex' relationships. McCall Tigert (1996: 49) suggests 'when heterosexual people ask me what they can do in this journey, my response is, 'Listen, listen, listen' to the stories of gay /lesbian /bisexual persons. We want to be heard'. And so I long to listen to their stories, because 'when persons reflect theologically on the realities of their lives as they actually live them, rather than on the projections of others, then externalisations of those projections can occur and psychological integration is possible. In other words, a theology of liberation leads to a psychology of liberation' (McCall Tigert 1996:115).

### 1.3. Discursive Positioning

Early on in my studies at the Institute for Therapeutic Development, I did a lot of reading around the area of postmodernism, social construction discourses and narrative pastoral practices. These have become foundational to my world-view, and intrinsic to all I have said and will say in this research project. However, for the sake of the reader, it is probably a good idea for me to briefly describe some of these influences in a little more detail.

#### 1.3.1 *Postmodernism*

I am grateful to be living within a post modern context, as I believe that this has helped to facilitate a context in which sexual differences can be described, lived and accepted. As the name implies, postmodernism emerged in reaction to a 'modern' world-view. Rejecting the modern notion that 'truth' can ever be absolute, postmodernism challenges modernistic ways of thinking. It challenges any media's capacity to convey 'truth', rather emphasising the plurality of viewpoints available (Kemmis 1996:202). The scepticism of deconstruction that lies at the heart of postmodernism (Morgenthaler 2001:3) has challenged the 'truth' of the nuclear, heterosexual family, and has challenged the wisdom of a uniform society. Preferring participation to hierarchy, postmodernism rejects colonialist perspectives, preferring contextuality, organic wholeness and openness, and a widening of our perspectives to include different ways of knowing, like that of ritual, metaphor and symbol (Herholdt 1998:215 –229, Lather 1991:84).

Some theologians like Dockery (1995:49) are concerned that the relativisation of our faith will 'dilute' our faith. I often hear my concerned colleagues ask this question: 'If everything is relative, what standards do we have left, and what morality can we offer a world so desperately in need of morality?' Anglican Archbishop of Tanzania asks a similar question: 'How can we draw people to the faith of Jesus Christ if we do not follow the scriptures?' (*Time* 20 October 2003). (In this regard, also see 3.2.2.2.)

Along with Rohr (1999:85-88) I am not sure that the function of the church, as a faith community is to be a watch dog for morality. I think the function of the church is to be a place where, in encounter with God (in ritualised public worship), life-change happens. Anderson and Foley (1998:37) tell us that the 'conjunction of



both narrative and ritual ... is exceptionally powerful', but warn us that 'public worship is in danger of succumbing to deceit whenever it promotes the divine narrative to the detriment or denigration of the individual and collective stories of the gathered community'. An example of this happening is where Archbishop Mtetemela of Tanzania, referring to liberals who are asking for the total acceptance of gay people into the Anglican Communion, says of their possible ex-communication from the world wide Anglican Communion, '[i]f it means cutting off the leg because it is no use, then the Lord will lead us to do that' (*Time* 20 October 2003). For too long, in the South African church too, the absolute 'truth' of God's story has been told at the expense of the stories of the people. Apartheid, with its discriminatory practices gaining their approval from Dutch Reformed Theology, is just one evidence of this practice. The exclusion of gay people from their local churches is another. I am grateful for the inclusiveness, for the listening to other stories, that post modernism breathes into our faith, and I think that only a faith that can withstand the stories of each of our lives, is a faith worth living.

### *1.3.2 Narrative Pastoral Approaches*

When I first discovered the field of narrative therapy and narrative pastoral approaches, I thought 'that's who I have been created to be!' Now a Methodist minister, I had been a High School English teacher for ten years. I had watched the ways in which texts (in this case, literature) had the power to transform not only me, but also the students I taught. This was particularly true with regard to the 'Protest Poetry' that I taught. For a white South African, who had lost a brother to the war in Zimbabwe, it was this listening to an alternative voice for me that helped me to see things differently. I was shocked to the extent to which I had been enslaved by the discourses of my white, privileged, heterosexist society, and so, in response, I developed a hermeneutic of suspicion (Cochrane, de Gruchy & Peterson 1991:24). This hermeneutic of suspicion seemed to dovetail with my passion for caring and my call to the ministry, in a way that I could never have predicted. Having done so, I discovered that the stories of scripture were then able to empower me and countless others to live lives that contradicted the dominant discourses of heterosexism, patriarchy and of western individualism in our times.

Teaching literature led me to believe that we *are* the stories we tell about ourselves (Epston 1993:173). Narrative therapy, though, has given me practices for deconstructing some of the unhelpful stories that we believe about ourselves

(Kotzé & Kotzé 1997:8). It has also helped me to find ways of re-authoring life-stories so that these portray the preferred ways of being of the people who consult me (White & Epston 1990:16). Kealey McRae (quoted in Gergen 2001:44) tells us that 'telling one's story is a means of becoming', and this resonated with my own experience.

The works of David Epston (1990, 1993,1994) and Michael White (1990,1991) have impressed me deeply, and have profoundly affected the ways in which I interacted with the research participants of this project. Their concepts of 'dominant and alternative stories' (White & Epston1990:18-33) helped me to find ways of seeing life differently, not only for myself, but also for the church, and for 'being with' hurting people within the church (White & Epston 1990:13-32). Clandinin and Connelly (1991:259) state that 'one of the basic human forms of experience is as story', and that therefore a fundamental method of personal growth is in 'restorying' one's life. One practice that Epston and White (1990:38-65) use to do this is in considering the relationship between the person and the problem. Learning to 'externalise the problem' helped us as a group to find ways to stand up against notions that formerly seemed insurmountable. For example, Theresa, one of the participants, had felt that 'being gay' meant that something was intrinsically wrong in herself. As the group externalised this, calling it 'the problem', so we were able to begin to see that it was the *church* that had a problem in their discrimination of homosexuality, not the gay women themselves. Lester (1995:22) speaks of the need to be looking toward the future story in order to find hope in the present, and this sense of the narrative passing of time provides a framework for my personal hope. As we watched each others' stories unfurl, we became excited about not only where we had come from, but also where we were going (see 4.4).

White and Epston's (1990:84-163) as well as Clandinin and Connelly's (1994:421) use of everyday texts, like letters, helped me to see how profoundly useful these research methods and therapy practices could be. After the first two group meetings, I wrote a summary of all that the group had discussed. After the third group meeting I changed to a letter format, and asked the research participants which format of summary they preferred. They all chose the letter option, finding it to be a more accessible option. As a result, from then on, after every group session, I wrote a letter to summarise what we had learned during our time together. I found that in this format, I could also be more reflective, and ask

questions that I had not thought of earlier during our times together. In this way, I found, along with Epston (1994: 31), that these letters 'extended' the time that we had available for meeting – our conversations were able to continue beyond the times allocated to be together. The following is an example of just this:

*Carolyn shared that she could never think that she's wrong to be gay. She says she feels so close to Jesus, and spends so much time with Him, she's sure that he would tell her, if He didn't like her sexual identity. She said that she couldn't understand, if her relationship with Maggi was wrong, why it was that the closer she got to Maggi, the closer she got to God. She described how, after breaking up with a boyfriend at one time, she was convinced that she would rather die alone and old, than be in a straight relationship. She shared with us how she doesn't even have a teeny doubt that her sexual orientation is 'wrong'. She did, however, share with us her sadness that in the 'gay scene' very few relationships last, because it seems that it is not as 'wrong' to have a relationship with a gay woman in a committed relationship, as it is for a married woman to be unfaithful.*

*We then spent some time exploring her picture of God. She said that He has moved from being quite distant, to being a close friend. She feels God answers her. She said that the scripture that talks about us 'being in Jesus, so that he can be in us' is one that has been with her all week.*

*The reflecting team at this point made a few comments. Des sadly agreed with Carolyn's experience of the gay scene and relationships there, saying that 'it's all the same people in the gay scene wherever you go'. She expressed how the boundaries just don't seem to be as clear in the gay scene, perhaps because it's too easy to get out of a gay relationship. Maggi said that she thought it might partly be because gay people can't see a future to their relationships, and also partly because the community doesn't give the same support to a gay relationship as it gives to a straight one. Can I put my own question here? **I wonder how we can help gay couples to have more community support? I also wonder how we can help the gay community to value long-standing relationships?***

This valuing of letters by the group resulted in many of the research participants writing letters to me at the close of our group meetings, telling me some of what they had experienced in our times together. For example, Theresa wrote this:

*These meetings, listening to other people relate their stories, where the focus was on God and the church, as much as on our sexuality and the difficulties involved, has been enlightening for me. I have experienced a great deal of self- growth. I have also experienced an awareness of the root of my own lack of peace (and distance from God), as a result of listening to the participants and to you.*

*I have come to realise that as much as I am not 'out of the closet', and certainly have no desire to hurt those I care about, that my greatest difficulty with this issue is really between me, the church and God. I have difficulty in reconciling with myself and my feelings, not because of society, or peoples' perceptions, but because of how, through the Church (and hence society) I have perceived how God sees me. This has been very negative and destructive in my life.*

Interestingly, this valuing of story lead me to re-value the narrative dimension of my experience of God, and made me more curious about other's narrative of their experience with God. It helped me to understand why the church has placed such value on the telling of stories, for as Brueggemann (1993:63) tells us, we 'cannot know Yahweh apart from Yahweh's story'. (In this regard also see 2.3.7.)

### *1.3.3 Social Construction Discourse*

As I used to be an English teacher, I have always taken language very seriously, but epistemologically, social construction discourse has provided me with the tools of deconstruction to use language, and so to use conversation, to both critique and transform. Postmodern discourse questions the western conception of objective, individualistic, ahistoric knowledge (Dockery 1995:34-50). Gergen (1985:272), however, encourages us to use social constructionism as the vehicle for that questioning. Social construction discourse is a postmodern approach that provides a meaningful epistemology for therapies using conversation as a means to help people (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997:1). If meaning is constituted in conversation, then the dominant discourses of society will be perpetuated through language too. In other words, not only the meanings of our words, but the meanings of our very lives and relationships are constituted by the dominant discourses of society (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997:1). For example, Alcoff (1997:330) and radicalesbians (1997:154) suggests that the words 'lesbian' and 'woman' have been taken away from women by men's 'overdetermination' of this term. Faderman (2001:415) suggests that young girls are 'indoctrinated' with 'the notion that to be normal she must transfer the early love she felt for her mother first to her father and then to a father substitute – a man who is more than she is in all ways; older, taller, better educated, smarter, stronger.' As we challenge the meanings of the words 'lesbian' and 'woman', so their initial meanings, created in dialogue, are changed, again through dialogue, and that opens up the possibility for us to be able to reconstruct new identities. For example, some feminist thinkers are determined that only women have the 'right to describe and evaluate women', and so use terms like 'the woman identified woman' (radicalesbians 1997:153 –157) in place of the words 'lesbian' or 'gay women'. (For a further discussion of this concept see 3.2.1.) Anderson and Goolishian (1992:27) call this process of meaning change 'problem organising and dis-solving'.

Foucault tells us that we are never outside power (Foucault 1980:92-108). He also tells us that power is relational, and that these relations 'cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse' (in Foucault 1980:93). But if practices of this power can be made visible through 'deconstructing' and 'reflexive conversation', then the dominant discourses of society can be challenged, and new ways of being introduced. We deconstruct the underlying assumptions of our language through having a 'radical scepticism' about any 'regimes of truth', taking apart the 'text' of our language, (undoing it, not destroying it) and analysing 'the gaps, silences, ambiguities and power relations' within our conversation (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997:7) as in the example of words and terms like 'lesbian' or 'woman identified woman' above.

One of the ways in which we can deconstruct the power of these 'truths' is in 'reflexive conversations'. In these conversations, a variety of interpretations of an event are offered. This can be done through the use of 'reflecting teams' (White 1991:38), where a team of people can interview the therapist, and even each other about an interview that they witnessed between the client (who in this project is seen to be a research participant) and the therapist. Then the research participant can decide for him or herself, from the multiple interpretations available, how they want to interpret the situation (White 1991:38). Having a variety of interpretive options increases the sense of personal agency in the research participant, and in this way '[c]hange is then enabled within language' (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997:6). I will discuss this further in 5.4.2.

## 1.4 My Research Question

This research represents a search for the integration of Christian spirituality and gay sexuality within a post-modern context, and its challenge to practical theology, the MCSA, and specifically Northfield Methodist Church (hereafter referred to as Northfield). The research comes from a place of personal interest and pain, and utilises narrative pastoral practices to interview gay women at Northfield Methodist Church about their lived theologies. As a result, when formulating the focus of my research curiosity, I sought to bring together my concerns for the spiritual and the sexual well being of gay women. My research question is thus twofold:

- How can a faith community primarily constituted by a heterosexual spirituality hear and accept, and thus validate the experiences of gay spirituality? and
- How can a gay spirituality contribute towards forming a more inclusive faith community?

## 1.5 Research Aims and Objectives

In order to give me a practical direction for the research, the above questions were then expanded into the following aims and objectives:

- To explore the experience of the spirituality of gay women in a heterosexual faith community.
- To co-construct alternative preferred stories of an inclusive Christian spirituality.

While these were the aims that I began the research with, the more time that I spent in conversation with my research participants, the more I realised that I needed to be doing more. Participating with the research participants in this journey led to a change taking place in me. I became self politicised (bell hooks 1997:534), and this in turn led to a desire for more; to facilitate a discussion with the rest of the congregation I lead, around being Christian and gay at Northfield. Practically, I found what it was that I wanted to do when I read about 'consciousness raising': 'meeting in small groups of women over a period of time, for the purpose of discussing personal experiences' (Reinharz 1992:220). I will discuss this in detail in 4:4. And so, because my research changed me, I have been forced to add another two objectives to the work that I want to accomplish through this research project. They are:

- To reflect on the practices of exclusion and inclusion regarding gay spirituality at Northfield Methodist Church
- To encourage practices of transformation to include gay spirituality at Northfield Methodist Church.

## 1.6 Research Procedures

### *1.6.1 Choice of research participants*

It was because I was so curious about what it is that keeps gay women in the church that I invited the women who were gay and in my church to be part of this research process. There were 'commonalities' amongst research participants. All

of them had a 'rich heritage of faith' (Riehl 2000:150), most of them 'have come out', at least to some extent, and all of them are persons involved currently/recently in the life of Northfield Methodist Church. They are also all articulate, well educated, assertive, white professional women in their thirties and forties.

Maggi holds a very senior position at Vista University, and holds a doctorate degree. Carolyn is her partner, who runs her own business. They have adopted two children, and are very committed to Northfield. Des is a sales person, and a musician. Bernice is a teacher who also runs her own business. Pixie and Theresa are passionate about animals.

#### *1.6.1.1 Ethical Considerations*

There were some ethical implications to my choice of research participants. Because Kotzé (2001:7) reminds us that we must care *with*, not *for* people who are in need of care, I needed to negotiate with each research participant individually, about the journey ahead. Before inviting them to join me in my research as a research participant, I shared with each participant what my research curiosities were. I also asked them where their interests lay, and asked them to bring these to the meeting, so that together we could decide where the research should go. As it was, they were equally interested in this area of curiosity, and they were happy to go along with it, with the proviso that if something 'came up' as we went along, that we could explore that too. Each participant knew that her participation was voluntary, that she was free to withdraw from the project at any point, and that confidentiality would be preserved throughout. Before we began with the group meetings, I asked each research participant to sign a consent form (see Appendix 2B) that would then give me permission to use their stories in this research. All of the participants were happy to do so. Some chose to use pseudonyms, while others chose to allow me to use their real names in the final documentation of the research. (For more about my collaborative approach see 2.1.2.)

#### *1.6.2 Group Meetings and Texts Produced*

Boulding (1999: 111) tells us that 'we need others to make us whole' and says that we need to craft 'relationships that fully acknowledge the other as equal'. This, together with my commitment to reflecting teams (White 1991:38, and see

1.3.3), led me to choose to use a group method, to learn from the research participants what it was that helped them to integrate their sexual and spiritual stories.

In our conversations, each research participant took a turn, and was interviewed by me using the same very open-ended questions each week, which the research participants had approved. Knowing what was coming, helped the research participants to prepare for their interviews. This was crucial, as it provided a 'safe' space, something the church has not been good at providing gay women. For example, I asked them to tell us the story of their integration of their sexuality and spirituality, and to reflect on any obstacles there might have been to this integration. I also asked them what actions they had taken that had facilitated the process of integration, and whether their picture of God had changed at all during this process.

I had also prepared a list of 'reflecting questions' to be used as a guide for the rest of the participants who took on the role of 'reflecting team'. Many of these questions were 'experience of experience' questions (Reinharz 1992: 218), such as:

- Does the story you have heard now have any connections with your personal story? If so, what are they?
- What things in the story were very different from your own experience? What have they taught you?
- What common themes in the story could you identify?
- How does that help you to make sense of wider issues?
- Has there been a shift in your thinking?

These questions formed the basis of the research participants own spontaneous comments and questions. The repetitive procedure was interesting, as we were constantly going over the same ground in different ways, and this worked together to produce a lovely 'thick' (or repeatedly well described) description of the 'alternate story' (Morgan 2000:74,75). This meant that the new alternate story began to be more 'available', and therefore more 'livable' to the research participants than it had previously. Patti Lather (1991: 77) suggests that 'group interviews provide tremendous potential for deeper probing and [for a] reciprocally educative encounter'.



At the end of each session, I wrote an open letter to whoever was interviewed, which was made available to all of the research participants the following week. This was done in order to render the 'lived experience into a narrative or 'story', one that makes sense' (White and Epston 1990:125). These letters were edited by the team. If any of them felt that I had not understood the conversation accurately, they corrected the letter. This 'taking it back to the respondents' (Olesen 1994:166) was a practice I repeatedly encouraged. Even the final draft of this research was taken back to the research participants for their final approval. I also encouraged each of the women to, in their spare time, create a text that would describe their experience of being simultaneously gay and Christian. Reason (1994 :329) encourages the use of 'text mediated discourse' suggesting that 'it is important for an oppressed group, which may be part of a culture of silence based on centuries of oppression, to find ways to tell and thus reclaim their own story'. Reinharz (1992: 214) also recommends the use of 'private writings' for understanding a particular class of women that has been systematically ignored. This creative text writing opened the door for other performative ways of being in the group such as song and poetry. Reason (1994 :329) believes that 'story telling ... and song ...and other engaging activities encourage a social validation of "objective" data that cannot be obtained through the orthodox processes of survey and fieldwork'. While they worked on their texts, I worked on mine, a summary of the exciting DEWCOM proposal to Conference (DEWCOM 2003). It certainly was wonderful to share 'the raw lived experience' of the letters, the songs and the children's story that were produced by my co-researchers, (see Appendix 1) and these 'concrete', 'context-dependent' texts did become the centre of our time of being listened to by the Methodist Bishop of our district at the last group meeting at my home (Reinharz 1992:224).

In addition to their being listened to, I also gave the participants some literature that I had found personally very helpful. Each time I would first describe the material to them, and ask them if this sort of material would be something that they would find useful. I began with a copy of a sermon by a colleague in which he publicly apologised to gay people for the homophobia of the church (A Storey 2003)(Appendix1). I hoped that this would help them to listen to others with a belief that some at least were listening to the stories of gay people in the church. Then I shared with them the summary of the DEWCOM proposal, and the hope it had given me. This was done two months ahead of the proposal actually being completed and presented to Conference. I asked for their input with regards to the

way I had summarised it, and was pleased to adopt the amendments to the summary that one of the group members proposed (Reinharz 1992:209). Other literature, like Germond (1997) and Wink (1999) which I gave them copies of, was enthusiastically received.

At the last meeting, we each presented our texts to the Bishop, and then I presented each of the research participants with a hand written letter, in which I personally thanked each woman for what I had learned from her story. Remembering that the rainbow is a gay symbol, I also gave each of the research participants a rainbow book mark for their Bibles, with the text from Genesis 9: 16 'Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant *between God and all living creatures of every kind* on the earth'. We then had a special tea in celebration of the significant step that we had taken towards a new and preferred version of life (Morgan 2000:111). I describe this more fully in 3.6.

#### *1.6.3 Narrative Conversations*

Reinharz (1992:213) tells us that feminist research is driven by its subject matter, rather than by its methods. As I wanted to give a voice to women who have historically been silenced, especially by the church, my practice needed to give as much freedom and self-determination to the co-participants as possible. I was particularly interested in research 'starting from women's actual experience in everyday life' (Olesen 1994 :163). This resulted in my choosing a conversation-like practice of interview. Because I wanted a 'new narrative to emerge' (Anderson & Goolishian 1992: 35 -38), I needed to explore the resources of the 'not-yet-said'. Through the asking of therapeutic questions, I hoped the co-researchers would produce their own knowledges, thus empowering them to develop their own agency and personal freedom.

#### *1.6.4 Written Research Reports*

I have already spoken about the ways in which I have used letters as research reports. Using the research participant's own words as much as possible, I summarised what we had spoken about in the session before. Together with Patti Lather (1991:77), I was surprised that 'negotiation of meaning did not play as large of a role as I had anticipated'. Like the research participants from her project, apart from minor issues that I rectified, the research participants in this research 'felt that the preliminary report accurately captured their sense of the situation'

(Lather 1991:77). And apart from an initial debate about whether the research participants should refer to themselves as 'lesbian' or 'gay' (we finally agreed on the latter) there was very little debate about what meaning we each ascribed to words. I wonder if this was not because of the way that we listened to each other, without interruption, with a commitment to seeing things from the perspective of whoever was being interviewed that week. This does not mean that the research is free from subjectivity: rather it means just the opposite. Throughout both those letters and this research here, I do insist on using the pronoun 'I'. Research is not free from subjectivity just because the researcher intentionally uses the passive voice (Reinharz 1992:212).

I collected this information by way of note-taking and it was a wonderful way of slowing down the interaction so that I could 'stay with' the research participants in their experiences. Epston (1994:32) says that his slowing down process also gives him time to think, and helps him to reiterate important points by reading them back to his clients. I certainly also found this to be the case. I then summarised what we spoke about for the rest of the group and made copies for everyone. Because I value authentic participation in the process, I wanted them to each check that I had accurately reported what their particular insights were. The research participants preferred the use of personalised letters as a method of summary, and so that is how I continued throughout the rest of the research process.

When the group meeting part of my research was complete, I spent time reading and reflecting on what had been said by each research participant during the course of our four months (eight sessions) together. As I considered what had been said, I noted particular themes that had arisen repeatedly in the course of our conversations. These themes have become the outline of my discussions of the research in Chapter Three. While the areas of interest were not very different from what I had hoped we might talk about, the content of what was said was at times surprising to me.

## **1.7 Outline of the Rest of this Research Story**

In Chapter Two, I describe my qualitative research approach and my practical theological methodology. This provides something of a theoretical basis for the rest of the work to follow.

In Chapter Three, I provide a reflection on my conversations with the research participants and the Methodist Bishop of the District's outside voice, paying special attention to the ways in which they described the integration of their spiritual and sexual stories.

Because, in the feminist axiom, the personal is the political (Isherwood & McEwan 1996:173), in Chapter Four, I consider how what I have learned during the research process must necessarily influence my work as a minister. In this chapter I reflect on ways in which Northfield Methodist church does marginalise gay women, as well as ways in which we include them. I will consider ways in which our church practices (see 4.3.3 and 4.4) are being transformed to become more inclusive of gay spirituality.

In Chapter Five, I reflect on who benefited from this research, as well as what it is that I have learned from this research. I reflect on what I learned about gay spirituality, doing research narratively, from doing qualitative (particularly participatory action) research, and from doing it all from a feminist contextual theological discursive position.

## Chapter Two

### Describing the Research Approach

*'To work with others is not to lose oneself, but,  
first and foremost it is to find a larger self ' ( Welch 1990: 162)*

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes my qualitative research approach, as well as my practical theological epistemology. My choices in these areas were motivated by my commitment to a genuinely reciprocal, 'collaborative approach to critical enquiry' in order to 'empower the researched' (Lather 1991: 69), as well as by my commitment to a participatory mode of consciousness, where I looked forward to being 're-enchanted' (Heshusius 1994:16). I was determined that the research participants would not be exploited as 'subjects' in the exercise, and so I aimed to both produce knowledge, and empower the co-researchers through this research (Olesen 1994:329, Reason 1994:329).

#### 2.2 A Qualitative Research Approach

Because I wanted to use a research approach that would be flexible, and would privilege those most affected by the church's current attitude towards gay people, I chose a qualitative research approach. McTaggart (1997:28) suggests that '[a] distinctive feature of action research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of critically informed action that seem likely to lead to improvement and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice.' As a result, I was not quite sure what the research would look like when it was finished, only that during the process of the intensive study and production of knowledge, action and reflection would overlap each other constantly in order that the people involved would be able to, in McTaggart's words, 'make their own histories' (1997:27,39). I hoped that this would, in some way 'improve' (McTaggart 1997:30) the ways that Northfield Methodist Church interacts with gay people.

##### 2.2.1 Research as Activism

The integration of activism and scholarship has become so central to feminist consciousness that Reinharz (1992:175) was able to state that it is 'only when research is linked to activism that it can be labelled feminist'. And so it is that I have been challenged to come to this research with my own emancipatory

agenda. While my agenda has something to do with Patti Lather's rejection of positivism's belief that only 'one truth' exists and that our 'purpose [is] to empower the oppressed to come to understand and change their own oppressive realities' (Lather 1991:53), it has more to do with Sharon Welch's (1990:154) 'keeping alive' of 'dangerous memories'. It seems to me that the Church in general (and the Methodist Church in particular, as that is my context) has become a 'prisoner[s] of [it's] own perspectives' (Jennings & Graham 1996:179), particularly with regard to gay issues. And so, as a feminist Methodist Minister researcher, I share McTaggart's (1997:29) 'commitment to inform and improve a particular practice' within my own context. Reason (1994:328) tells us that our '[p]rimary task is the enlightenment and awakening of common peoples', but before I could get there, I needed to hear the stories of those most affected by the church's position on gay issues, so that the 'common people' would hear what gay people needed communicated, with their 'dangerous memories' - not just my views. The research participants and I needed to resist the dominant discourses of our context together. And as I listened to the voices of the research participants, I found that there was, growing in me, but also, I sensed, in the research participants in the group itself, a 'joy' in our communal resistance to these discourses (Welch 1990:167).

Derrida refers to discourse as 'text', and he uses it as a stage upon which the process of deconstruction is enacted (Jennings & Graham 1996:177). As we deconstruct discourses, as we might a literary text, so new meanings are able to emerge. (I will discuss this more in 1.3.3.) Feminist researchers use a variety of texts (like drama, diaries, and conversations) (Reinharz 1992:221-229) as research methods. Using these ideas as a springboard, in our group, we created our own texts of resistance. I will describe these in more detail in 3:5.

These texts represent my commitment to an activist agenda. I could summarise the agenda I started out with in these words: my quest is to liberate and 'hear to speech' (McCall Tigert 1996:129) Christian gay women. That I personally learned so much, and that I was challenged to do more, during the course of the research, and to challenge the church on it's position regarding gay women, was an added benefit.

### *2.2.2 Researcher Positioning and Research as Collaboration*

Choosing a 'collaborative approach to critical enquiry' (Lather 1991:69) such as participatory action research (McTaggart 1997:27) asked of me not to see the women whom I had chosen to participate in this research project as 'subjects', but rather as participants (Kotzé 2002:25). Reason (1994:324) reminds us that scientific method has monopolised knowing into the hands of a few, and that this knowing is 'fueled by patriarchy, alienation and materialism'. Instead I chose to use 'a collaborative approach to critical enquiry' (Lather 1991:69), or in other words participatory action research. Gay women, particularly in the church, have been silenced for so long, that I wanted to use an '[e]mpowering approach to the generation of knowledge' (Lather 1991:55). Aware of the subtlety of power relations (McTaggart 1997:33), I tried to 'destabilise' privileged ways of knowing, in order that the research participants could find 'spaces' for their [unheard] voices, so that they could 'reclaim their own story' (Reason 1994:328), and have the agency that differentiates involvement from mere participation (McTaggart 1997:28). We met in my lounge over cups of coffee, and with our children watching television in the next room. And although I could never stop being their minister, we did become as far as we knew how, 'just women sharing together'. I repeatedly expressed my gratitude for their graciousness in sharing their lives with me, a representative of an institution that had caused them heartache (see 3.4).

In feminist participatory action research, the researcher is empathetic, identifying with, rather than making the other into an object (Reinharz 1992:233). The researcher requests the 'authentic participation' of everyone in the group (McTaggart 1997:29). This requires that the researcher adopts a 'not-knowing' attitude (Anderson & Goolishian 1992:29-31) of genuine curiosity, by abandoning control and adopting an approach of openness, reciprocity, mutual disclosure, and shared risk (Reinharz 1992:181). This participatory consciousness – the participation of the total person in a 'democratic and interactive relationship' (Reinharz 1992:182) requires profound openness and receptivity. It insists that the researcher lets go of the perceived boundaries that constitute her 'self'. Heshusius (1994:16) calls this 'allocentric' knowing, and she says that it does not lead to a loss of self, but that rather to 'a heightened feeling of aliveness and awareness', a kind of 're-enchantment' with the world. Heshusius (1994:18) calls this 'selfother unity', and says that when it is present 'there is an affirmative quality of kinship that no longer allows for privileged status. It renders the act of knowing an ethical act' (Heshusius 1994:19).

As there can be no intimacy without reciprocity (Lather 1991:69), in participatory action research, it is the very 'people [who are] studied [that also] make decisions about the study format and data analysis' (Reinharz 1992:181). She suggests that the research be carried out in 'sequential interviews conducted in an inter-active, dialogic manner that entails self disclosure on the part of the researcher, in order to foster a sense of collaboration' in the group as a whole (Lather 1991:77). In this way, while the research participants offer their own suggestions about the direction and even content of the research, the researcher considers and responds to these suggestions openly, without the guarded superiority that so often characterises researchers. It meant that when suggestions were made regarding 'who should be interviewed when?', and 'what else we could talk about?', and 'where we should go to from here?', none of us had to worry whether the decisions we reached needed to be subject to some greater scheme of things that the research participants knew nothing about, and that only I was privy to. I enjoyed the sense of freedom that this feminist participatory action research brought to me, and seemed to bring to all the research participants.

Reason (1994:324-6) suggests that there are four phases in this collaborative process:

**Phase one:** This is where co-researchers agree on an area for enquiry, and identify some initial research propositions.

**Phase two:** Here the group then applies these ideas and procedures in their everyday life and work, and experience them as 'practical knowing'.

**Phase three:** In this phase, the co-researchers will in all probability become fully immersed in this activity and experience. He calls it the stage of 'full immersion'.

**Phase four:** Now the co-researchers return to their original research propositions and modify them on the basis of what they have learned.

It seems that for me and the other co-researchers, our research followed this pattern. Phase one was the recruitment phase, and our first group meeting. At this stage, some of the research participants suggested other women who may like to be part of this research, and invited them to come. Together we established what our aims for the research were. Phases two and three merged, as we each reflected on our past and current experiences of being gay Christian women. This practical knowing, and immersion, became especially pronounced around the time of each of our individual interviews. Phase four was, for me, the process of writing



up the data, and was for the co-researchers, the process of being invited to comment, change or enlarge upon any of the written research.

Weiskopf & Laske (1996:131) address a slightly different process of collaborating with their research participants. When doing 'emancipatory action research' they suggest that the facilitator and participants relationship is one that can be described by two interlocking overlapping circles. The one circle represents the researcher's interests, and the other circle represents the participants' interests. Where the circles overlap in the middle, that space represents the co-operation pact between the researcher and the participants.

In my research, I tried to keep elements of both of these models. I wanted each of the women to come away from the experience feeling that she had gained something personally from the group, in addition to whatever it was that the group accomplished together. I also wanted all of us to be, as Reason suggests 'fully immersed' in the experience of this research. This research was not something that was an 'add on extra' to our lives; we all started eating, drinking and sleeping the research conversations, pondering them, and living them. In this regard, Kotzé and Kotzé (2001:10) remind us that 'only if participants benefit from the research, will it contribute to ethically acceptable academic knowledge'. Letters and phone calls received at the termination of our times together (see Appendix 1 for two examples) testify that this was indeed the case.

### *2.2.3 Research as Reflexivity*

As Weiskopf & Laske (1996:131) imply in their image of overlapping circles, it is impossible for the researcher to be free from her or his own interests, presuppositions, knowledge, and experience. As a result it is essential that I, as the researcher, became as reflexive as possible throughout the research approach (Reinharz 1992:212), whether that be in the planning, acting, observing, or reflecting stages of the research (McTaggart 1997:34). For example, I became aware, through conversations with my supervisor, that while I was passionate about my determination to accept gay people into every level of church life, I was less accepting of people with a bisexual orientation. This was because of some previously unexamined biases about promiscuity that I had not known that I held.

Because of this commitment to reflexivity, I value transparency, and so I began the sessions by sharing with the women of my group my own research curiosities.

It is also why I asked them, every time we met, to help me in my attempts at reflexivity, by checking that what I considered to be the salient points of our times together had been what they had experienced to be the key elements too.. However, despite my determination to be collaborative, I had to be reflexive enough to know that 'it is [ultimately] the *researcher's* intentionality that defines the starting and stopping points' of the research process (Clandinin & Connelly 1994:416) [my emphasis]. Because I am aware that as a leader in my community, I am being watched with a great deal of concern by many of the leaders of my church (who may consider 'lesbian spirituality' a questionable topic for a Masters degree), I have to be especially careful and responsible. It is critical that researchers be responsible for the consequences of their research (Riger and Foucault cited in Reinharz 1992:212). This research is a subject about which people within the church have very strong feelings. It has the potential for splitting the church along the lines of those who employ a conservative hermeneutic, and those who employ a more liberal one. The current threatened split between liberals and conservatives in the Anglican church world wide over the appointment of gay Bishop, Gene Robinson (*Time* 20 October 2003) evidences this. The MCSA survived apartheid, with Methodists fighting on both sides of the war. I need to do my research in such a way that it facilitates the MCSA's survival of this potentially church splitting issue, as well as doing it in such a way that the voices of people in same sex relationships are heard.

#### *2.2.4 Research and Audiencing*

Reinharz (1992:192) tells us that 'demystification' is 'the change in consciousness that occurs among the relatively powerless when they consider their situation in a new light'. One way in which I, as a researcher, facilitated this process of demystification, was through the use of reflecting teams, which are also sometimes called 'outsider witness groups' (Morgan 2000:122) . Each week, I interviewed one of the research participants from our group, and then, a fair way into the conversation, opened it up for the rest of the group to share their comments, and reflections on what they heard. After giving the person being 'interviewed' a chance to respond to these ideas, we would then return to the conversation. When I wrote an open letter to each person after the interview, I would include the comments from others during these 'reflecting team' moments. The following example is an excerpt from a letter written after Des's interview:

*With relation to the question about standing up, you instigated quite a bit of debate. You rescinded a previous contention that 'maybe we do need to stand up', as a result of Kim's question: 'Why do we need to stand up: we need to just be!'*

*Maggi agreed, saying that 'standing up' was something that ministers needed to do, like Alan Story had done. She pointed to the paragraph in his sermon about 'exclusivity' especially. Theresa asked whether this was not a time to stand up, because this was the particular cross that we have to bear. Kim wondered what 'standing up' would achieve, and Bernice replied that she thought simply being an example was encouraging to other Christian gay women. She said that she thinks that lesbians are complacent, and allow the status quo to be maintained.*

Fiske (1994:198) suggests that 'one of the key locations where social and semiotic struggles are entered, where the weak engage the strong, is this interface between practice and structure, '... where the top-down or the bottom-up control over such difference can be contested'. When there can be a conversation between a person who represents an institution's policies, and a person whom those policies effect, then the possibility for helpful change increases dramatically. Poling's (1996:175, 177) 'spirituality of resistance' also involves 'confronting persons of power' through the telling of stories. And so, with the group's permission, I invited the Bishop of our District to attend the last of our meetings. It was with graciousness and enthusiasm, that the Bishop accepted my invitation to simply be an 'audience', to listen to the experiences of the women in our group as they described their particular experiences of being gay and Christian at Northfield Methodist Church in Benoni. In addition, I, with the permission of the group, communicated with two other teams in the Methodist Church who are exploring this same issue. They are the ISTEam group in Cape Town, who at their Synod this year, (during the time that my research group was running) received approval to be a voice and listening ear for people concerned about not only gay but also other issues of inclusivity in the church in the Western Cape) and DEWCOM (the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's Doctrine, Worship and Ethics Committee, who during the time that this research was being written up, presented a very exciting proposal regarding same sex relationships to July 2003 Conference, the highest decision making body of the MCSA). Their audiencing gave a sense of having people in the church in solidarity with us.

### *2.2.5 Research as Education*

While it is self evident that research is intended to educate the researcher, I was amazed at the extent of education that has happened, and I believe will continue

to happen, as a result of this research process. Reinharz (1992:211) sees research as a 'process of discovery' that is not complete when the research is finished, but that its completion is just the beginning of a process. Typically, for feminist research, I suspect that I am the one who has been most changed by the research. Reinharz (1992:194) tells us that usually a researcher learns about herself, about her subject matter, about how to conduct research, and that she is profoundly changed by what she learns about herself, and that the process leads her to re-conceptualising the phenomenon studied and completely revising her world view. It is not an over-statement to say that this is what happened to me during the research process, as we will see in Chapters Three and Five.

I am not the only one who was educated though. Reinharz (1992:194) suggests that '[s]ome people cooperate as research subjects because they believe that information about their experience will demystify the problem for others'. I know that some people in my group came in precisely to play this particular role. Maggi and Carolyn had spent a tremendous amount of energy in reconciling their spirituality and their sexuality, and I was particularly glad that they were in the group, because they were, in many instances, able to help the others to come to their own greater understandings of their own sexual and spiritual journeys. For example, it was they who were able to begin the process of externalising 'the problem' (see 5.2) from being intrinsic to gay people, to being a problem of discriminatory practices – a 'problem' that 'belonged' to the church. As our sessions progressed, though, Maggi and Carolyn spoke of their own growth through being in the group, just as much as the other members of the group did.

Reinharz (1992:194) also tells us that 'demystification begins with self-education. At the request of some members of the group, I made a few of the articles dealing with a theology of sexuality that I had been reading, as well as a sermon by a colleague (Storey: 2003) available to the group. This had a profound effect on their personal experience, as I will describe later in 3.5.2. This supports Reason's (1994:328) contention that 'knowledge' is a 'significant instrument of power and love'. I also offered the group copies of an article that I had found particularly helpful, and had summarised into a single page document. Within a week, this document had been forwarded by one of the group members to other people outside of the group.

Reinharz (1992:195) tells us that 'feminist criticism is to change the world by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read'. As other people begin to read that little document, and this research, I hope that it will bring change. I do know that others are being changed, even as they ask me what I am studying and I simply say 'Lesbian Spirituality'. They are educated to consider that 'lesbians' *have* a spirituality – something that by their response, is quite a revolutionary thought for them!

This education can also be called 'consciousness raising' and it is 'the unique feminist method, because it embodies principles such as enabling women to discuss and understand their experiences from their own viewpoints' (Reinharz 1992:218). Everyone who has come into contact with this project has had their consciousness raised, has been educated, and has been changed - whether they have been part of the group, or simply have asked about it, whether they have read anything that has come out of it (the document, the articles, the letters), or whether they have been an audience to it, as Bishop Meaker was.

## **2.3 A Contextual Method of Doing Practical Theology**

### *2.3.1 Introduction*

Because heterosexist assumptions have been at the heart of much of the suffering of gay women in the church, I have to take seriously the lived gay experience of my research participants. Cochrane, de Gruchy and Petersen (1991) have developed a contextual approach that, because I find it very useful, I have used as the basis of my practical theological framework. I also use a feminist theology extensively. As feminism is also a contextual theology, these two approaches complement one another well. Just like Cochrane et al (1991), and like theologians like Denise Ackerman (1991, 1996, 1998), I have at the heart of my faith a desire for a 'transformed community', where all are seen to be equally valuable. I, too, long to 'confront the forces of death and nurture the forces of life' (Cochrane et al 1991:10,12) in all of the people of my community, irrespective of their sexual orientation.

### 2.3.2 *Faith Commitment*

During our group meetings it became obvious that the *individual* faith journeys of each of the research participants, and their *experience of church* were two completely different things. I believe, along with Richard Rohr in his tape series *Hope against the Darkness* (2002), that the only way in which we can ever be separate from God's love, is if we choose to be. Certainly many of the research participants experienced this to be the case (see 3.3) However, Cochrane et al (1991:15) suggest that 'no-one does theology from a position of theological neutrality'. I am concerned that membership of the institution of the MCSA is an altogether different, more negative experience from the acceptance by God, that the research participants experienced in their personal faith journeys, and that this is because of the church's theology about homosexuality. Although committed to 'being a community of love rather than rejection' (DEWCOM 2003:1), unfortunately, in practice, the MCSA does not publicly welcome gay people to join us in our faith journey, and into every level of our life together. I have taken as my starting point that 'acceptance into the membership of the church' should be based on a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour' (DEWCOM 2003:2) as it is with all other people, and not on one's sexual orientation. I agree with the DEWCOM committee's 'conviction that the church cannot be characterised by judgement and exclusion if it is to be the church of Jesus Christ' (DEWCOM working document 2003:2). And, while Northfield might be seen to be more accepting of gay people than some other churches within the MCSA, it too, in places has prevented gay people from being in ministry there. And so it is that I must examine what is happening in my community.

### 2.3.3 *Beginning in Context*

Ackermann (1996:45) tells us that 'accountability to a community is a means of expressing faith in the role of theology to contribute to the way people shape their lives'. If we believe our faith, we have to take the 'lived experience of individuals and communities' seriously (Cochrane et al 1991:17). We can do this by reflecting on our praxis, being prepared to 'see things from below', and by seeing 'healing as an exercise in liberating praxis' (Ackermann 1996:42). Cochrane et al (1991:17) tells us that what 'people are feeling, what they are undergoing, how they perceive this, how they are responding – these are the experiences that constitute the primary data of the context'.

And so it is that I come to this research with an awareness of the pain that hetero-patriarchy (Barret & Cramer 1997:55) has caused to many of the women who are research participants in this study. I also recognise that they have a deep desire to have a relationship with God that can be publicly lived out without recrimination. This research explored the 'primary data' of what their experiences are, and have been (Cochrane et al 1991:17). And as a practical theologian, I must recognize the difficulty involved in trying to hear from the research participants their stories of 'truth', as they are communicated with such difficulty across the barriers of hetero-patriarchy (adapted from Ackermann 1996:45). If I am able to hear the voices of these gay women research participants, I must be prepared to critique the church and society.

#### *2.3.4 Social-ecclesiastical analysis*

Contextual practical theology analyses the relationships of the church and society with individuals, taking seriously those who are marginalised. Cochrane et al (1991:18) say that their task for a prophetic theology of our times would be an attempt at social analysis, or what Jesus would call "reading the signs of the times". Reflexivity must be at the heart of any contextual researcher in the church, for the church is an institution that has an ambiguous, yet dominant socio-political role (Cochrane et al 1991:18). The idea of institutions and practices of culture being powerful are central to the narrative method too. In therapy, White (1997:223) tells us that poststructuralist questions about who we are today, inform an inquiry into how lives are constituted through the knowledges and practices of culture.

In my conversations with the women in my group, I constantly tried to help us all to reflect on the ways in which the discourses of the church and society have constituted our lives, and my supervisor helped me to do the same for my own life. For example, Theresa, allowed the discourse that she is 'not worthy of taking communion, because she continues to sin by choosing a gay lifestyle' to rob her of the involvement in church life that she wished she had. Action research, though, is research in which actions and evaluation do overlap (McTaggart 1997:27). And so it has been with fascination that I have watched the process of the DEWCOM proposition being drafted, being discussed, and being presented at Conference. While the resistance evidenced at Conference to the document was expected, I was overwhelmed by the wide support for the document. The 'signs of

the times' show an increased acceptance of same-sex relationships, even in the church!

Having briefly considered social ecclesiastical analysis, I move on to some theological reflections.

### *2.3.5 Theological Reflections and a Hermeneutic of Suspicion*

Cochrane et al (1991:18) suggest that because it is only through the scriptures that we have access to founding events of our faith, scriptures must have priority in our search for the transformation of our communities. And yet Ackermann (1996:42) reminds us that '[t]heological statements [only] contain as much truth as they deliver practically in transforming reality. I am glad, then, that feminist theologians like Fiorenza have found ways of 'recapturing the bible' (Isherwood & McEwan:1994:50). It was wonderful to see how life-giving reading Walter Wink's (1999: 33-49) more liberal approach to the reading of scriptures relating to homosexuality was for many of the women in my group. To begin to explore the idea that 'homosexuality is not a sin' was almost too awesome for some of them to contemplate. For others, it simply confirmed what they had known all along, but hadn't been able to 'prove'. It is a pity that the voices of conservative, evangelical theologians have been privileged at Northfield, through popular, powerful organisations like *Focus on the Family*, and through popular media such as *Joy Magazine*. As a result, many people in our pews, including our gay people, do not realise that there is a variety of authentic scriptural interpretation available, not all of which is conservative.

One way in which we can free ourselves and others from being trapped into our existing theologies is through utilising a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' (Cochrane et al 1991:23, Germond 1997:189). When bringing theology to a particular context, Cochrane (1991:23) reminds us that it must be a critical process 'passed through the sieve of suspicion – before it is reworked and restated within [our] context'. Without this suspicion of the effects that our faith practices have on our communities, we would not be able to critique them. Critique is at the heart of the agenda for feminist liberation theology (Ackermann 1991: 107). As we become suspicious of the assumptions that we make when we read the bible, so we become suspicious of who is using the bible to protect their own interests (Germond 1997:189). Germond makes the point that the Bible is a contested document, and has been used as a weapon to promote apartheid, slavery and



patriarchy (1997:190-191). Discovering 'new' ways of interpreting scripture, that challenge heterosexism and conservative interpretations of passages that are seen to relate to homosexuality, is in my opinion, essential to the process of integrating the sexual and spiritual stories of gay people. It is this 'fusion of the horizons' of their own situation and a *new* meaning contained in the Christian story that Gerkin (1991:19) refers to as 'good pastoral work', and was certainly personally transformative for both myself and for the women of my group.

It was this hermeneutic of suspicion that started me on the journey towards this research. It is also this hermeneutic of suspicion that allows me to critically reflect on 'the gaze' of what some theologians are saying (Eliasin 1999:76) that bring gay people to such a point of utter despair that they commit suicide (White 1998:5).

And it is in resistance (Spargo 1999:21) to the discourses of society that a hermeneutic of suspicion makes possible, that I believe a new way of doing sexuality and spirituality will become possible.

### *2.3.6 Spirituality*

Together with Cochrane et al (1991:84), I long to develop an empowering, transforming, hopeful, life affirming spirituality that is responsive to the suffering of all people (but for the sake of this research, that is particularly responsive to the suffering of gay people within the church). Prayer is for me, the natural work of spirituality. But prayer has also been seen to be a very private, individualistic exercise. While there is no doubt that it is experienced as such by many people, Matthew Fox (2001) provides me with a different way of looking at prayer, that is both private and universal, both personally nourishing and responsive to a hurting world. He considers prayer to be a radically rooted response (a promise of loving self-giving) to the mystery of life, and that to respond to life is to respond to God (2001: 49-95). It is this prayer, this 'saying yes' to all that stands on the side of life, and this prayer, 'saying no' to all that stands on the side of death, that inspires the spirituality that I embrace throughout this research. Throughout the group sessions, we would always close in prayer, remembering that what we were doing was, in addition to being radically rooted in life, also transcendent.

This saying 'no' to all that stands on the side of death, and this saying 'yes' to all that stands on the side of life, led me to want to work pastorally with gay women. I

didn't just want to fight for their rights. I wanted to pray with them, inspire them with scripture, and walk alongside them as a fellow pilgrim.

### *2.3.7 Pastoral Practice and Planning*

Yes, I began this research because I wanted to care pastorally for gay women in the church. But Pattison (1994) reminds me that even pastoral care is a political and a communal act. And so it is, that I have traced all the steps above in order that, at last, the work could be put into planned, transformative pastoral care, in this final step (Cochrane et al 1991:84). I believe that pastoral care has to begin with an understanding of the creation of humanity in God's image – the 'imago dei'. When we see people not only as being created in the image of God, but going further to my position of being reflections of God to the world, then we must value them highly, and cannot help but care for them.

I love Patton's (1992:30) expression of Pastoral Care as being 'remembering', for we are too quick to forget our gay sisters and brothers. The bible tells us over and over to remember – 'Remember your Creator in the days of your youth' (Ecclesiastes 12:1), 'do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19). It also tells us that God remembers us: 'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands' (Isaiah 49:15). It is in the remembering that we face up to who we are, and what has happened to us. And if we allow ourselves, and the memories of the story of Jahweh (Brueggemann 1993:63) into those places of pain, then we are able to 'make those memories redemptive' (Botman 1996:161). This remembering doesn't lie solely with the pastoral care giver, but with the entire community. It is only as we operate as a 'community of anamnesis' that the needs of the hurting can be addressed.

It is my hope that this qualitative, participatory, narrative research done from the position of contextual theology will enable gay women to be more and more 'remembered' (or included) into the church (White 1997:22), and this is why education of the church community is vital. But also 'pastoral care givers represent a God who is aligned against the forces of futurelessness'. (Lester 1996:2) Just as narratives always move to a climax, and a resolution, 'human' stories must also be going somewhere and have a future dimension. When I ask myself the question, 'what is the future story of gay women in the church?', I am

filled with hope, as I envision a community of acceptance and care, where condemnation has been transformed into communion (Graham 1997:145, 172).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has considered why I have chosen a feminist, participative, action research approach that I have used in my research. It has also considered the implications that choosing a feminist, contextual, practical theological method has had on my thinking and practice. In the next chapter, I will reflect on the stories that were shared during the process of the research. I will reflect on how hearing and accepting these stories help us to form a more inclusive faith community.

## Chapter Three

### Integrating Sexual and Spiritual Stories

*What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?  
The world would split open*  
(Muriel Rukeyser cited in Mc Goldrick, Anderson & Walsh 1989:427)

### 3.1 Introduction

In Chapter One I outlined the need for the church to take gay and lesbian spirituality very seriously. In Chapter Two, I spoke of my desire for the church to become a transformed faith community, where all people are seen to be equally valuable, and I spoke about the need to begin that process from women's actual experience in everyday life' (Olesen1994:163). Not only does this emphasis on the research participant's experience facilitate a contextual approach to Practical Theology (2.3), it also honours a qualitative research approach (2.2).

After I had finished all of the group sessions, I spent time reflecting on the stories I had heard spoken into being. It seemed that four questions formed the central strands of all of our conversation. They were:

- How have you integrated the spiritual and sexual stories of your life?
- How has your picture of God changed during this process? and
- How has your experience of the church and its pastoral care impacted this process of integrating the spiritual and sexual stories of your life?
- What are your feelings about 'standing up'? (We let each research participant define for herself what she would like to 'stand up' to, but for most of us, this referred to a justification of gay orientation and practice.)

Sequentially exploring these questions, about how dominant discourses have been challenged by these alternative stories, will be the focus of this chapter, as I research the central curiosities underlying this project, namely:

- How can a faith community primarily constituted by a heterosexual spirituality hear and accept, and thus validate the experiences of gay spirituality? and
- How can a gay spirituality contribute towards forming a more inclusive faith community?

I will deal with each of the four questions in a new section. In each section, I will begin by identifying some of the dominant discourses that the group identified as being unhelpful. Once these 'problem saturated stories' (White and Epston 1990:16)

have been outlined, I will then move on to a description of the ways in which we as a group were able to deconstruct the stories, and reconstruct alternative, preferred stories.

## 3.2 Stories of Sexual and Spiritual Integration

The first question which formed a central strand to many of our conversations during the group meetings was the question 'How have you integrated the spiritual and the sexual stories of your life?' I will begin this section by outlining some of the unhelpful discourses that we, as research participants came to the group meetings with. I will then describe the practices that lead us to being able to re-story (White & Epston 1990:14) the impact of these discourses on our lives.

### *3.2.1 Dominant Discourses Surrounding the Integration of the Sexual and Spiritual Stories of Christian Gay Women*

Social construction discourses (1.3.3) tells us that meaning is created in language. *Imber-Black* (1989:352), suggests that 'larger systems carry the culture's assumptions and values ...[and as] such they are silent and powerful transmitters of beliefs regarding women's positions...'. It is with great sadness that I read the words of a friend who authored the 'Love in Action' newsletter, which had a mostly Christian readership. This author seems to have been overcome with society's homophobia (McCall Tigert 1996:21) to such an extent that she daily chooses to reject, for the duration of her life, any expression of her homosexual orientation. She writes this about her own journey 'out' of homosexuality: 'I realised that if you want out of homosexuality, you'll have to fight for it with your life!' (Le Roux 1996:3). This is just one example of the dominant discourses of our society and church that stand against gay people. As a result of these homophobic discourses, gay people feel condemned to a life of suffering because of their homosexuality.

As researcher and minister, I wanted to stand with the participants against these discourses and the effects thereof, that are so painful. We did not use the terminology 'discourse' in the group, as I did not want to use academic language to increase my power/knowledge position in the group (Fillingham 1993:7). I now use this terminology in this research report to identify the dominant discourses and their oppressive effects, as well as to clarify the preferred alternative stories that we as a group co-constructed.

Stuart & Thatcher (1996:215) talk about 'a shift from understanding sexual sin as a matter of wrong sexual acts to understanding sexual sin as alienation from our intended spirituality'. I find this is a far more helpful discourse, as it stands against popularised damaging *dualistic* discourses, and rather stands with those who bear the brunt of the alienation of their sexual *identity* from their sexual *acts*. Gerkin (1991:19) says that 'good pastoral work' always entails a fusing of the horizons of the 'situation at hand' and the 'horizon of meaning contained in the Christian story'. I think that Stuart and Thatcher's understanding of sin allows the horizons of Christian gay people's sexuality and their spirituality to fuse.

It is therefore not surprising that one of the topics that the research participants and I discussed most was the question: '*How have you integrated the spiritual and sexual stories of your life?*' Maggi spoke about how difficult this was, because she had believed, she had internalised, the church's very powerful discourse of sin and was trapped in guilt. She spoke of how hard it was for her that the church believed that 'being gay is immoral, or wrong or evil', and that it saw heterosexuality as the only option. O'Neill and Ritter (1992:213,214) explain that this difficulty with being perceived as evil complicates the 'coming out process', as Christian gay people 'become convinced that they are indeed evil and contaminated'. Maggi also spoke of the ways in which her parents' initial shocked disapproval of her being gay made it harder for her to integrate the story of her sexuality and her spirituality. The discourses of sin, contamination and evil created 'a personal discomfort' in her, she said. (In the next section, 3.2.2 'Alternative Stories', I will explore how she, and the other research participants created alternative stories in response to this pain.)

Des agreed with Maggi that it is hard for a gay person to integrate their sexual and spiritual stories, saying that it is difficult to hear the church saying that one is 'not okay' when one is gay and Christian. She spoke of how she felt uneasy and judged by what she termed the church's 'strict faith' (or dogma) that taught her that she was 'responsible to God' (and so would be punished) for her sexual orientation and choices. It was partly this sense of being judged and oppressed that kept Des on the fringes of the faith community. Des did not only object to the discourses that the church promoted about being gay, but questioned the church's practices regarding other marginalized groups as well. Because she has a black adopted brother and an unmarried pregnant sister, Des feels a solidarity with other minority groups and objects generally to the oppressive discourses within

the church about all 'minority groups' (Poling 1996: 176). But she particularly rejected the discourses that suggested that only if one is heterosexual, is one free to explore and enjoy one's sexuality 'normally'. She said that if you are gay, then that sexual development is considered abnormal, and so teens who consider themselves gay are sent to see psychologists to talk about their sexual expression, in the hope of changing it. However, 'straight' teenagers are free to explore their sexuality 'normally'. Des objected to the way in which this practice, instigated by a restrictive discourse, contributes to gay teenagers rejecting a faith community (and so their spirituality) as a step to protect, rather than to reject 'themselves' and what they see to be true for themselves.

Des told us how these oppressive discourses and practices spoke so loudly in her life, that when she, at nineteen, acknowledged to herself that she was gay, she determined that she would 'never act on it' in order to protect herself and her family from the pain of rejection that she knew would be inevitable. When she finally did confront the discourse and act in accordance with her sexual orientation, then 'being gay', just as she had feared, did do some terrible damage, especially in her relationship with her mother. From then on, for a few years, what Des termed 'healing with Mom' became a top priority for her, and was in fact, happily eventually accomplished, when she and her Mom were able to again enjoy being together without fighting about Des' sexual orientation. Des made it clear that none of this pain was helpful, though, to her integrating her sexuality and spirituality. The discourse and practices stemming from this only brought pain and suffering.

Pixie identified with Des' and Maggi's experiences of the discourse of shame that results in church and family rejection of gay people. Having as a child watched another child be teased for being a 'lesbo' taught her something about shame, but her parents' disgust in response to Pixie's childhood questions about lesbianism, taught her more about how powerful the discourse of shame surrounding homosexuality is. During the group conversations Pixie described how she had learned to 'compartmentalise' her life, keeping her gay, church and music friendships quite separate, in order to avoid shame and disrespect. Listening to the effect that the practices of shame had on her life, I became even more committed to challenge the church to be last place where shame should have a foothold. I agree with Frost (2001:38) who states that is unconscionable that, in our churches grace 'has become a weapon of shame'. By 'compartmentalising'

her life, Pixie was able to resist the shame and judgement that the discourse of 'if you are gay, then it becomes your 'overarching identity' could have brought to her life. While I was interested in how Pixie integrated the stories of her life, she presented me with an alternative story of resistance. Refusing to have a singular identity, Pixie was able to find places where she felt 'safe', where she could develop trust. McNeill (1994) suggests that '[t]rust is the cornerstone of a psychologically healthy personality; without it, a spiritual life is impossible'. Because the idea of a singular identity was not helpful in the integration of her spiritual and sexual stories, Pixie kept them separate, so that she could have both a sexual and a spiritual story. Pixie's story of 'compartmentalising' her life resonates with the post-structuralist notion of 'a multiplicity of selves' (Davies 1999:89). Gergen (1991:228) expands on the idea of multiplicity of selves when referring to identity as 'ever-shifting, ever-expanding, and incoherent', where 'personal identity can be created and re-created in relationship' (Gergen 1991:146). This 'multiplicity of selves' can be illustrated in Pixie's situation: in her relationship with music and those accompanying friends she is just 'another person enjoying music', whilst in sexual relationships she is a woman who enjoys intimacy with another woman. Nicholson (1997:153-157) describes such an identity as being a "woman identified woman". (This term is very helpful in terms of responding to the shame that male-designated words, like 'lesbian', and 'dyke' have created. Accepting such an identity is a solid refusal to accept the roles assigned to women by men, and a determination to develop a new sense of self. For a further discussion of this term see 1.3.3.)

Both Bernice and Theresa clearly stated in the group conversations that, having listened to the other research participants, they do not feel that they have integrated the sexual and spiritual stories of their lives in the same way. Bernice said that she experienced her spirituality and her sexuality quite separately, having deliberately chosen the exciting challenge of the lesbian life style, and then quite separately, having chosen to follow God. However she became suspicious of what she termed 'the church's indoctrination'. She felt that powerful people in the church would decide personal things for other people, like, for example, who was popular, or who was not, or how God 'should' be worshipped. This suspicion (something akin to the hermeneutic of suspicion that I discuss in 2.3.5) fostered in her a determination to not be a 'sheep', (she meant by this that she would not just follow the crowd unthinkingly). It seems that this suspicion has kept her from 'fusing the horizon's' (Gerkin 1991:19) of her sexual and spiritual stories. As a



minister, I longed for her to find a way to reconcile her sexuality and spirituality, and so was excited by the alternative stories that were developed in the course of the group meetings.

### *3.2.2 Alternative Stories of Integration of the Sexual and Spiritual Stories of Christian Gay Women*

#### *3.2.2.1 Stories of Love*

Maggi, having thought very deeply about both her faith and her sexuality, had done a lot of personal, social and biblical analysis to counteract the dominant discourses of society regarding gay people. The first, and probably most powerful alternative story that she had generated, that had helped her to integrate the story of her sexuality and her spirituality, was the one surrounding her falling in love with Carolyn. She was curious about why, if according to specific interpretations of the Bible, God hated homosexuality, God would bring her back to Himself through a gay relationship? She wondered why it was that when she was in this gay relationship she experienced God's blessing in her love, both with Carolyn and with their two children, Liam and Andrea. She experienced this 'blessing' as being the same kind of 'joy and peace' that 'only Christ can bring', that she had first experienced when she had been attending an Anglican youth organisation as a teenager. At that stage she was not yet even faintly aware of her sexual orientation.

Bernice was interested by this idea of God calling Maggi to Himself through her gay lover. Bernice noted that it was also, ironically, through her gay relationship with Des that she had first re-developed her relationship with God. Pixie was also interested by the way in which God called the research participants back to Himself through their gay partners, but in a different way. She only became a Christian after she had known for most of her life that she is gay. She said that it was becoming a Christian that had helped her 'to feel at home in her own skin'. And she spoke of 'the joy and good that has come out of my relationship with Theresa', and quoted a Rod Stewart song that described her feelings about being with Theresa: 'If loving you is wrong, then I don't want to be right'. This experience of being 'at home in her own skin' relates almost exactly to Corn's (1995:216) expression of his experience, when he said 'I didn't feel

comfortable as a gay man until after I became a Christian'. Carolyn told us that the closer she got to Maggi, the closer she got to God.

So it seems that the profound love-experiences that all of the research participants of the group had experienced were very helpful in the authentic integration of their sexual and spiritual stories. Empereur (1998:4) tells us that sexuality and spirituality are no longer at odds with each other when we stop asking '[i]s it right or wrong?' and begin to ask 'to what extent is my life a loving one?' Perhaps their experience matched that of Dame Julia of Norwich who states '[i]n our sensuality, God is' (Ellison 1996 :220). In *Graced, Gifted and Gay*, Frost (2001:36) says that there is 'no better catalyst for authenticity than irrepressible joy'. The fact that all of the research participants could relate to this alternative 'joyful experience of love' story, and add their own experiences to it, meant that the love story developed a lovely thick description (Morgan 200:15) of God's approval of each of their love relationships. As a result, it became a powerful alternative story of caring and mutuality.

In our group meetings we discovered another powerful alternative story to the dominant discourses of shame and judgement that surround gay women in the church. This alternative story revolved around our use of the Bible.

### *3.2.2.2 Bible Stories*

When, at the age of twenty-eight, Maggi had 'discovered' her gay sexual orientation, she had been to see a male Christian psychologist. Together with him, she began to question the ways in which she had read the Bible. He helped her to realise that parts of the Bible, especially the Holiness Code, was written from a different context to the one in which she now found herself. It had been written from a context of war, and the psychologist explained to Maggi that within that context, the nation did not 'need' gay people. It needed heterosexual people who, through their procreation would increase the tribe numerically, and thus give them the advantage over other groups in the area. In addition, Maggi said that she had discovered that at the time that the Holiness Code was written, the Israelites did not want to be identified with the religions of the surrounding nations, who allowed homosexuality in the form of temple prostitution. These ideas had helped her to change the way that she was reading and interpreting the Bible. Gerkin (1991:18) calls this pastoral

practice 'retrieving and reinterpreting biblical metaphors and images'. He believes that as we reinterpret the meanings we have assigned to biblical passages and images, we are then enabled to 'relate those meanings to the specifics of the contemporary situation in which the pastor is working (1991:18). These explanations helped Maggi not to lose what she refers to as a then 'on/off love affair with God', as they helped her to challenge the discourse that states that some interpretations of the bible say that it is 'wrong' to be gay. While Maggi did not share what her sources for these views were, similar views are held by Brash (1995:39-46) where he reminds us that the Holiness Code 'sets out how the behaviour of the Israelites, as God's chosen people, was to be distinct from that of other nations' (1995:41). He also reminds us that because the Israelites believed that a woman was only a 'vessel in which the seed [of a man] developed into a new life', 'any action in which the seeds of a possible new life were wasted was declared to be sinful' (1995:41).

Jakobsen (1997:71) speaks of a similar experience to Maggi's of 'the lights going on' as she 'discovered more progressive interpretations' of scripture, and how these changed her views concerning homosexuality.

I shared with the group my very similar experience; that it was primarily Wink's *Homosexuality and the Bible* (1999:33-49) but also Germond's *Heterosexism, homosexuality and the Bible* (1997:188-232) that had helped me, like Maggie, to deconstruct my biblical discourses surrounding homosexuality. Wink (1999: 39) reminded me of how many of the sexual practices of biblical times, especially of the Holiness Code, we have rejected today (like polygamy and endogamy), while continuing to accept that homosexuality is abominable. Germond (1997:228) inspired me to believe that the texts were insufficient evidence for overwhelming the biblical theology of inclusion. Iam and Cenis (2002:5) in their survey amongst clergy found a definitive correlative relationship between fundamental and conservative readings of scriptures ... and a rejection of homosexuality as an acceptable 'Christian' sexual expression of love. Furthermore, Empereur (1998: 82) suggests that 'when we force the bible to answer questions of which it has no conceptions, then we don't get biblical answers!' Wink's article had helped me to continue my move from a conservative to a liberal reading of scripture, by helping me to realise that the Bible could not really answer the questions I was asking about sexuality. Constantly surrounded by people whose pain at being homosexual was

intensified by the churches condemnation of them, and wondering what I could do, forced me to ask questions that I might not otherwise have asked.

In response to my sharing of this experience, the group requested that I write a short article about what I spoken about. I then put together a paper in which I summarised and adapted (with their permission) the DEWCOM proposal and which I entitled 'A Gay Defence'. It was an attempt to provide some brief thoughts on the possibility of fusing the horizons of gay spirituality and sexuality. In it I put some questions against traditional 'biblical perspectives' on homosexuality, and explored other ways of knowing, like through tradition and reason and experience. Within a week, Maggie had sent a copy of it to a gay friend who was struggling with being both Christian and gay. Maggi's action brought me to a place of wonder. I realised how right Fox (2001:84) is when he says that when our freedoms are increased, we are then able to expand the freedom of others. (I have included a copy of A Gay Defence in Appendix 1, as I wrote it as a participant text.)

Des was interested in this conversation about reading the Bible, but her interest was from a slightly different perspective. She said that she also needed to find a way for God to speak to her, but, as she put it 'beyond' the Bible. She chose a slightly different route from the one Maggi and I had travelled. She shared an experience of reading the book *Conversations with God* (Walsch 1997), and of how this way of viewing God gave her a new way of viewing God, that made more sense than the traditional biblical Sunday School ways that she had rejected. (I will explore this picture that Des had of God further in 3.3.2.)

Theresa was interested in the participants' responses to the 'problem' of scriptural interpretation. She spoke of how she had for many years disagreed with traditional interpretations of scripture regarding animal sacrifice. As someone committed to animal rights, she couldn't integrate the story of the God she loved and worshipped with a God who could demand the abuse of animals as part of that worship. Then, when Theresa read the Wink (1999) article, she said that she wished she had read it 'twenty years ago' because it helped her to stand against the discourse that uses a particular interpretation of the Bible to judge Christians for being gay. Once again, in the group, she found a different reading of scripture helping to form a strong story of resistance towards oppressive discourses (Wylie 1994).

This alternative story, rich with repetition, as well as our ways of knowing, helped to contradict and so to heal what McCall Tigert (1996: 72-78) calls 'splitting', 'projective identification' and the 'internalisation of shame'. In our group meetings we shared, and reflected on each other's alternative stories of the love of our partners, and the ways in which they had helped us to see that God approved our relationships. We shared different ways of reading scripture, and those practices helped us to see that God may be less judgemental of us than we had at first thought. McCall Tigert (1996:115) suggests that 'when persons reflect theologically on the realities of their lives as they actually live them ... then psychological integration is possible. In other words, a theology of liberation leads to a psychology of liberation'. Certainly our group reflections on scripture, and on our lives brought us more freedom than, as individuals, we had experienced before.

### **3.3 Pictures of God**

The next question which formed a central strand to many of our conversations was the question 'How has your picture of God changed during the course of our group meetings?' I will begin by exploring some of the discourses that the research participants came into the research with. After that I will look at ways in which the unhelpful aspects of those discourses were 're-authored' (White and Epston 1990:13).

#### *3.3.1 Dominant Discourses Surrounding the Pictures of God of Christian Gay Women*

I will never forget Theresa's words when we first began the group meetings: 'I feel like a disappointment to God, and God is at my centre'. According to Theresa, this internalisation of the dominant discourses of the church has caused her to feel that she cannot take communion. In the Catholic Church, which is where Theresa originally comes from and loves deeply, 'you have to confess your sins before you take communion'. Since Theresa could not 'stop being gay', and she believed that 'who I am is wrong', she excluded herself from this most precious gift of connection with a God who would really rather die than live without her, in the sacrament of communion. She said this feeling of 'not being good enough' to take communion, has prevented her from being as involved in church life as she would have liked to have been, and that she experiences this as a kind of 'loss'. Amideo

(1999:1) agrees with Theresa that our theology can alienate us from our experience of God, and tells us that 'an antiquated and erroneous theology, nurtured by fear, confronts Christian gays and lesbians with unbearable exclusion ... and spiritual torment'.

Other research participants in the group shared similar stories of feeling cut off from God, because of the discourse that 'homosexual and holy' are incompatible terms (Empereur 1998:2). Bernice had simply drifted away from church, and so distanced herself from God, because she didn't feel that she 'fitted in'. When Maggi finally admitted to being gay, and was at last experiencing 'being right' in her relationships with other people, she spoke of finding it hard to reconcile 'being an abomination' with the sense she had of God calling her back to Himself. As Empereur suggests (1998:2) Maggi initially found it hard to find in her same sex relationships 'a means of grace' that would help her to move 'towards sainthood'. It must be said though, that her picture of God had been seriously damaged by her introduction, for the first time, at University in Stellenbosch, to people who believed that the Bible taught that Apartheid was God-sanctioned. Unable to swallow the belief that God had favourite races, Maggi turned her back on God, writing a one page thesis entitled 'Why God does not Exist'.

This rejection of God, or this feeling of being cut off from God, in my experience, speaks of gay people battling to integrate their sexual and spiritual lives. In fact it is typical of most of us trying to integrate even our heterosexuality with our spirituality. Ind (2003:xiii) speaks of our 'collective discomfort around sexuality'. We live in a society that 'overwhelmingly privileges those who get turned on by people of the other sex' (2003:32). This centralising of some privileged discourses happens in society, despite homosexuality having been removed from the American Psychological Association's list of mental disorders (McClain-Taylor 1996:81). In addition, because the Catholic church has taken such a strong stand on the issue of Natural Law, '[a]ny sex which is not open to the transmission of life (the papal way of describing making babies) is therefore not what God wants...'(Ind 2003:12). This restrictive attitude has silently infiltrated church-talk of all denominations about sexuality, and so '[s]exual activity outside of marriage comes to be seen as sinful, and homosexual practice as especially dishonourable' (2003:13).

As a group, the research participants and I felt that we needed to challenge these negative pictures of God if we, as co-researchers were to be able to enjoy being with God. Without enjoying spirituality, or finding it inspiring, it would be difficult for the research participants to integrate the stories of their being gay into their spirituality.

### *3.3.2 Alternative Stories of the Pictures of God of Christian Gay Women*

Ironically, it was Theresa who, in the very first week of her being with us, began the construction of her alternative story of God. She picked up on Maggi's experience that despite discovering her homosexuality, Maggi had felt God calling her back to Him. Theresa said that at the same time she felt that the church was pushing her away, 'God kept calling' to her. Empereur (1998:33, 34) describes her own similar experience this way: 'I always find myself coming back to the church - I desert her, but she is the only mother that I have'.

This picture of God patiently, gently, calling and reaching out was further developed by Carolyn. She spoke of her conversion experience being a very emotional one for her, but one that marked the beginning of a very gentle experience of God. She describes him as 'softly placing night lights' in 'corners of the rooms of her life that have become a little dusty'. These 'dusty' places referred to all sorts of ways in which she can become a more whole person, but have nothing to do with her sexual identity. She described how this experience developed into a 'trusting, loving relationship with Jesus'. This relationship has grown so strong, she is certain that He would tell her if He didn't like her sexual identity. She described her relationship with Him as having been developed from the scriptural picture from John 15 of us 'being in Jesus, so that He can be in us'. Gerkin (1991:16) tells us that one of the goals of pastoral ministry is to understand the metaphorical images that shape our understandings of the Christian life. This gentle metaphor of God as a housekeeper, is certainly one that has shaped Carolyn's experience of God's acceptance of her. The de-institutionalised, personalised way in which Carolyn described the 'night-light' story of her picture of God, resonates with the importance that feminist theologians give to 'women's own oral traditions, myths and legends as inspiration for [their] spirituality and action' (Isherwood and McEwan 1996:10). Women's stories, like this one created by Carolyn, challenge the pictures that other Christian gay people have had of God. For example, the comfort and the intimacy of the picture that Carolyn

described is at odds with authors like Pierson (1989:5) who at 18, described his gay sexual state as 'a violent impossibility', and whose experience of God in his sexuality seems to be limited to his sexual orientation meaning that 'a part of him' is 'damnable'. However Carolyn's story does serve to confirm what Neuger and Poling (1997:166) suggest, that it is entirely possible for gay people to come to wholeness, even in the face of prejudice and suffering.

Des described an experience of driving into Bloemfontein right into an exceptionally beautiful sunset, and then, that night, of reading the book *Conversations with God* (Walsch 1997) and it all 'making sense'. While it is very hard to 'dissect' or even sometimes explain a spiritual experience, it seems that the combination of the awe that Des felt in viewing this particularly beautiful experience, led her to become more aware of God in a positive rather than a judgemental sense. In that state of awe, her reading of the book, that helped her to put new words to the ways in which she understood God, was a particularly profound experience. She described how this experience caused her picture of God to become so much more 'mystery and light and spirit'. Des saw this move away from traditional views of God, associated with 'good and bad', or 'right and wrong', to a new, less judgemental view of a more 'beautiful' God, as particularly healing.

Pixie described her preferred relationship with God as introducing a feeling of peace that she did not feel before, and an emptiness that had been there being 'filled'. Maggi told us that she 'enjoys the light of Christ and the love of God' as a 'blessing'. And at the end of our times together, I received a letter from Theresa, in which she wrote:

'I have difficulty in reconciling with myself ... because of how I perceived God sees me. This has been very negative and destructive in my life. I have a sense that this project (referring to the research group meetings) has been 'meant' and that I am on the start of a great personal journey. I feel an increasing awareness of God's love for me, and this is almost too awesome to contemplate...

I am thrilled that during the course of the research project, we were able to intentionally witness (Weingarten 2002) each other's alternative story, that described just how holiness and homosexuality are in fact compatible, and that reminded us that 'Gay sexuality is a fact of creation' (Empereur 1998:3). In



hearing each other's stories of feeling close to God, we witnessed that 'whoever we are and whatever we become, we are loved by God' (Ind 2003:145).

As a minister, while I am glad that the research participants individually experienced God's closeness, I am also concerned about their communal experience of God. Marshall (1994:74) says '[i]ndividual spiritual and sexual dynamics cannot be separated from the broader community of faith for the lesbian, gay or bisexual person', because as 'one's sexual orientation is oppressed and devalued in the name of God, one's spiritual life is at risk'. And so it is that we needed to move on to consider a more community-oriented experience of sexuality and spirituality.

### **3.4 Pastoral Care - Making the Church A Safer Place**

The research participants taught me that it is one thing to experience the love of God privately, but it is an altogether different and more difficult thing to worship God amongst a congregation of people whom one may feel is judging one – and it was just this that formed the third major strand of conversation in our group meetings. The question I asked each of the research participants was 'How has your experience of the church and its pastoral care impacted the process of your integration of the sexual and spiritual stories of your life?' Once again, I will begin by considering what some of the experiences of the research participants had been, up until we began to the group meetings. From there I will move on to consider ways in which we resisted the discourses of homophobia in the church. Halperin (1995:30) believes that it is this resistance that alters the dynamics of personal struggle. I believe that the experience of the group validates his assertion, as I will outline below.

#### ***3.4.1 Dominant Discourses Surrounding the Pastoral Care of Christian Gay Women***

Another of the four areas that we focussed on in our research group meetings, was the research participants experience of pastoral care. Reinhartz (1992:234) in her desire to free up creativity in research, allows for an unusual realm of study, the study of 'unplanned human experience'. In this section, I would like to explore the dominant discourses of an unplanned event that happened in the lives of

Maggi, Carolyn, Liam and Andrea during the course of our research together. Because another Methodist Church is so much closer to them, and because it is a multi-racial, but predominantly black congregation, Maggi and Carolyn decided to visit there one Sunday. They felt that it would be good for their coloured children to find some role models of 'their' colour, and were considering moving there permanently. Knowing that the community was a multi-racial one, led them to expect that it would be open to minority groups. That week the regular minister was not preaching. In his place was a local preacher, who told the congregation that the country was 'going to the dogs' because 'we are not holding onto God's laws. Men are trying to be women and women are trying to be men'. He said this in reference to media reports of a gay couple who had gone to court over a disputed surrogate parenthood case. The preacher's obvious heterosexism made it clear that he had internalised the church's discourse that being homosexual is an abomination. Knowing that the preacher believed them to be 'abominable' was extremely hurtful for Maggi and Carolyn. What was even more hurtful was the fear that this preacher might cause Maggi and Carolyn's children to begin to view their parents as 'abominable'.

This incident highlights how 'unsafe' a place the church can be for gay people. And yet it does not have to be. Corn (1995:216) came to a place of self-acceptance in regard to being gay, partly through, he says, 'the love and support of a particular congregation'. The church that Maggi and Carolyn attended that day was not 'a welcoming, caring fellowship' in which people grow and where 'homophile people know that you are committed to accepting and supporting them as fully as any other members of the church' (Pierson 1989:20). Instead, Maggi and Carolyn experienced 'rampant heterosexism and homohatred' (Neuger and Poling 1997:165). This is a practice of discrimination that many gay people have experienced, and so it was one that we especially needed to re-story (Laird 1989:439) within the group.

### *3.4.2 Alternative Stories of the Pastoral Care of Christian Gay Women*

Because Maggie and Carolyn did not want their children growing up believing that there was something wrong with their family, they felt that it was necessary to get up and walk out of the service mentioned above. In this, they were resisting the discourses that were prevalent in the church that morning. Halperin (1995:30) suggests that 'we don't refute discourses, we resist them'. Maggie completed this

resistance to the heterosexist discourse by emailing the minister later on during the week, and explaining their presence at church, and their reasons for leaving during the middle of the sermon. She concluded her letter by saying that she 'cannot join a church where my kids will be indoctrinated into believing I am sinful'.

This story of resistance to the church being unsafe, was embellished in other ways too during our time together as a research and support group. Halperin (1995:60) speaks of resistance not being negation, but being creative. Bernice spoke of her experience of the creativity of Northfield, when she described it as being a place that she came to because it was a 'circle of love'. This resonates with the way in which Williams describes community; 'discovering that there is a group in which there is real love' (quoted in Patton 1992:20). Patton believes that pastoral care is partly done through community (1992:15), and so it is that I have come to believe that Bernice's positive experience of community at Northfield was a good experience of pastoral care for her.

Theresa spoke of 'how wonderful' the Catholic priest was when she confessed to being gay'. She also spoke about how affirmed she felt when her priest prayed for 'gay couples in faithful relationships' along with other family prayers. This is an example of what Patton (1992:28) calls re-membering. He says that 're-membering is putting 'the body back together. The opposite of remember is not to forget, but to dis-member' (Patton 1992:28). As gay people, like Theresa, were included back into the community of the church through this priest's prayers, they were remembered and effectively pastorally cared for.

Des shared that she felt it would be helpful for other people to experience the acceptance she had received in this research group. She spoke about how she had previously kept a distance to protect herself from the judgement of other people, and how she had realised that she now needed to let people into her life. She said that realising the fact that no one at Northfield had ever condemned her, helped her to have the courage to allow people into her life. This realisation started to build trust into Des' life. McNeill (1994:317) tells us that the 'spiritual struggle, then, for most gays and lesbians is to achieve trust'. As Des developed this trust, her resistance to the discourse of distancing herself from others was very creative. She sang us this song that she and her partner had co-written:

### **Borderline**

You are the borderline  
Cross over me  
Around the corner  
These crossroads unfold

These borders are fading  
Land unexpected  
I am territory unclaimed  
Until you pass through these gate

*Here lie the valleys of my mind  
And the heart of a faithful child  
My soul was hidden from the unknowing crowd  
Come and see me now*

We'll explore never-ending horizons  
And try not to look back  
Cross over with me now  
Take my hand

O'Neill and Ritter (1992:210) tell us that one of the healing journeys that many gay people embark on is a journey '[f]rom disconnectedness toward interrelatedness'. This seems to resonate with Des' journey, for the next song she sang to us was about how much she is yearning to find a spiritual home, and is considering returning to church.

### **Find Your Home**

Find your home  
Only there will you be safe  
Find your home  
Only there will you be loved  
Find your home  
Only there will you be understood  
Only there will you find what you've been looking for

Only there will you be able to cry  
Only there will your heart learn to smile  
Only there will be an open door  
Only there will be me  
Waiting for you

Find your home  
Only there will the clouds be blown away  
Find your home  
Only there will your soul fly to the sun  
Find your home  
Only there will your feet be on the ground  
Only there will you feel that you can truly grow

If our churches can be experienced by gay people as a home for the heart, then our creative stand, resisting the discourse of church 'unsafeness', will have been everything we dreamed!

Because I am particularly interested in the pastoral care of Christian gay women, at this point I would like to reflect on how it was that we, as a group, were able to resist the discourse surrounding the unsafeness of attending a local church for gay people, and to generate these alternative stories of community love, of being re-membered back into the community, and of developing trust. (I will comment further on these reflections in 5.4.1, in 5.4.3 and in 5.3.1.) The interaction between the group members and myself, can be identified as an example of what Anderson and Goolishian (1982:31) describe as the 'client and therapist mutually affecting each other's meaning'. As we shared stories, and as we responded to each others' stories of the ways in which we had struggled, and of how we had overcome the oppressive discourses that told us that it is sinful to be both Christian and gay, we began to 'connect' with one another. Poling(1996:175) calls this pastoral care being 'immersed' in the stories and lives of others. For example, it was a powerful experience to know that the pain that I had endured in my concern for my brother was shared and deeply felt by the other research participants. In this regard Isherwood (1999:79) comments on the power of mutuality: 'Mutuality in relation is left to our feelings, which can know more deeply than our minds ever can.' Through mutuality, I learned from Theresa, for example, something of what it is to live, feeling shamed and condemned by scripture, whilst she was learning about another way of reading the Bible. As Theresa and I were mutually affecting each other, I experienced a process of 'connected knowing' (Goldberger 1996:5) taking place. Connected knowing is 'characterized by a stance of belief and an entering into the place of the other person or the idea one is trying to know' (Goldberger 1996:5). As a researcher, this connective knowing process enabled 'the receiving [of] the other into (the) self' (Noddings cited in McVicker Clinchy 1996:218). By listening to Theresa, I could feel with her, as I entered into the embodied space of her experience, the feeling of being marginalised and shamed. McVicker Clinchy (1996:208) remarks that 'connected knowers act not as adversaries, but as allies, even advocates, of the position they are examining'. Being immersed into the life-experiences of Theresa, (stage three of the process outlined in 2.2.2) I have become aware of the devastating effects of dominant heterosexist religious practices. Mary Grey

(quoted in Isherwood 1999:79) reflects on how 'growth in connection can present a radical challenge and lead to transformative action'. Through connective knowing, I, in turn, have become committed as a pastoral care giver, to develop a spirituality of resistance (Poling 1996:175) in my own congregation. This entails joining the struggles of 'resistance communities (such as Christian gay people) to help them (and myself) 'avoid hopelessness' (Poling 1996:175). As such, I have made the 'self a site for politicization' (hooks 1997:534). (In this regard see also chapter four.)

Maggi and Carolyn's resistance to the discriminatory practices of homophobia gave the research participants a way to begin to 're-story' (White & Epston 1990:14) their experiences of pastoral care, to include stories of love, of trust and of connectedness. Maggi and Carolyn's resistance to the heterosexism that they experienced when visiting the other church, by literally 'standing up' and walking out of the church, also became the spark around which the last and final strand of conversation that I will describe in this research report revolved.

### 3.5 Texts and Standing Up

#### 3.5.1 *Dominant Discourses Surrounding 'Standing Up' as Christian Gay Women*

Once Maggi and Carolyn had shared their story of having walked out of the church service, many of the group's conversations from then on revolved around the question: 'What are your feelings about standing up?' I have been deeply challenged by Mel White's (1998) article *Bringing in the Beloved Community*. Previously a ghost writer for many evangelical leaders, when his homosexual orientation became public knowledge, he set up a support centre for gay Christian people. In so doing, he hoped to gain some acceptance, if not justice, for gay Christians, but in a non-violent way. After some time he began to feel that he was not accomplishing that for which he had hoped, and he was tired of constantly fighting against the evangelical homophobic discourses of the very people he used to write for. In his article, he spoke about the temptation to give up on trying to get people to see that 'anti-gay rhetoric sanctioned and led (directly and indirectly) to the suffering and death of God's lesbian and gay children'. But then, he told the story of how he had received a letter in which he was told that he had

'broken a primary rule for doing justice non-violently. Giving up on my adversary was 'an act of violence' (White 1998:2). I shared with the group how this article had challenged me to continue to 'stand up'. By this I meant not giving up on speaking about the need for Christian gay people to be accepted into every level of the life of the group.

As a group, we understood 'standing up' as being quite similar to the idea of 'coming out of the closet'. However, because in the church, one is normally considered 'immoral' for being gay, 'coming out' is often not just self-disclosure, but is necessarily a *justification* of gay orientation and practice to some extent as well. As a result, it is much easier for Christian gay people, as some of the research participants and as Mel White were tempted to do, to give in to practices of 'silence' about being gay and in the church. Most of the research participants began the research preferring to remain fairly quiet about their orientation at Northfield. All of them had felt at least some disapproval from others that led to them thinking that it was better often to simply remain silent.

Pixie felt that each of the group members needed to follow their own path with regard to standing up, because each person is different. Marshall (1994:76) agrees with her, saying that it takes a 'great deal of courage' to stand against the 'heterosexism of church and academy which encourages silence and invisibility'. Marshall suggests that it is 'audacious for those within the safety of the academy or the institutional church to encourage lesbians and gays to name their pain publicly' (1994:76). Theresa, who was very aware of the discourses of judgement that surround being gay, spoke of not wanting to alienate people by standing up and therefore forcing people to face the question of a justification of a Christian gay lifestyle. Des had her 'distance', which she used to prevent herself from being judged. If she did not get too close to people, she wouldn't have to face the tough questions that justifying her sexual identity would entail. Bernice, because she could not integrate the sexual and spiritual stories of her life *for herself* as yet, was certainly not yet ready to justify herself *to other* possibly critical people. She felt that she did not yet have a story that she could stand up with, but that when she did, she would. Maggie and Carolyn said that although they did not hide their sexual orientation, they did not parade it either. They hoped that people would get to know them, like them and only then find out that they were gay. In this way, they hoped to challenge people's homophobia, by providing it with a face that they (already) liked. This would be a first necessary step towards a justification of a

Christian gay lifestyle for them. As we talked, however, the positions that each of the research participants initially held gradually developed into thinking about taking a much stronger position.

### *3.5.2 Alternative Stories of 'Standing Up' as Christian Gay Women*

While all the women in the group had begun to take up a stance against 'Silence', it was Maggi and Carolyn who had a different sort of resistance to the discourse of silence. They both stated categorically from the word go that they do not see themselves as being 'marginalised'. Because she now sees herself as an insider at Northfield, Carolyn feels that the church must listen to her, and in fact even begin to make space for her, as she does for them. Des also felt that if people in the church could get to know her, then they would have to say 'Des is wrong', rather than 'being gay' is wrong, and this would be a way of getting them to think twice about the issue.

Bernice had attended a church service during which Carolyn had publicly shared her faith. She shared how seeing Carolyn physically stand up in the front of the church to share her testimony with the congregation had inspired her, just knowing that there was someone in the church who was both openly gay, and a Christian. Theresa suggested that 'standing up' (or justifying a gay orientation) could be done powerfully in small ways, like when her priest had prayed for gay couples in faithful relationships along with other prayers for family life. Theresa spoke of how powerfully that 're-categorisation' of gay people, from being grouped with paedophiles, to being grouped with families, had impacted her own view of herself.

Maggi agreed with Theresa that it was the ministers that needed to be the ones doing the 'standing up'. She said that she thought ministers sometimes forget that they still have a very powerful voice, and that it needs to be used. McCall Tigert (1998: 137) tells us that just as a person who is disabled is not expected to build the ramp into church, so gay people should not have to defend their right to be part of any church community. Maggi spoke of the way she was encouraged by the stand Alan Storey had taken in his sermon, by apologising to gay people. I had copied for the group. (See Appendix 1 for a copy of this sermon.)

Carolyn spoke of her longing for there to be some place in the life of the church, perhaps a 'special-interest' gay cell (although Maggi commented that she does



not like what that has to say about marginalisation), or perhaps a published gay care line, or 'gay issues' evenings where topics like this could be addressed. Des spoke of the need that her Mom had for a 'parents of a gay person' support group, and suggested the need for a gay teen support group. Bernice commented that, as a teacher, she was amazed by the freedom that teens had to identify themselves 'with the gay scene'. She felt that if the church did not do something soon about its position on gay teens, then we would lose a lot of young people from the church. Carolyn said that being in this group had totally changed her. She said that she had moved 'inside of herself' from a place of 'complacency' to a place where she wants to put invitations on the cars at gay night-clubs in an attempt to evangelise people in the 'gay scene', and let them know that they are welcome, just as they are, at Northfield! She also said that having children has changed this need to stand up in her, as she does not want them to be ashamed of her, and said: 'if we're ashamed of ourselves, then they'll (referring to the children) be ashamed of me.'

The dangerous dichotomy between a love, and preservation of self (exemplified by silence), and a love and preservation of others (exemplified by standing up) was thus breached during the group meetings. All of the women, but especially Carolyn, were able to start seeing that working with others is not losing oneself, but is rather, 'first and foremost, it is to find a larger self' (Welch 1990:162). And when that 'larger self' is found, then 'people are empowered to work for justice by their love for others and by the love that they receive from others' (Welch 1990: 165).

I was excited at the 'future stories' that these research participants have created together. ' Just as narratives always move to a climax, and then to a resolution, so 'human' stories must also be going somewhere, and have a future dimension (Graham 1997:145, 172). When I ask myself the question, 'what is the future story of gay women in the church?' I am filled with hope, as I envision together with them communities of acceptance and care, where condemnation has been transformed into communion. (I will deal with this more in Chapters Four and Five)

### 3.6 Conclusion

At our last meeting together, we all had a chance to 'stand up' to the silence in the church that surrounds gay issues. I had invited the Bishop of our District to come and

listen to the stories of the research participants. For me, it was a standing up, of 'voices speaking truth to power' (Heskins 2001:187) as it was my public profession of where I stand on the issue to someone who has authority over my life. In that moment, I made the 'self a site for politicization' (hooks 1997:534). Each of the women had a chance to read, or sing, the 'texts' which they had created which spoke of their views, and their experience of being gay and being Christian. In these texts, we were able to integrate some of all that we had experienced during the four months of our being together.

At our last meeting, we were able to thicken our positive, alternative experience of the church and pastoral care, through our interactions with the Bishop. When he arrived, he laughingly remarked that he had 'been told to shut up and listen'. And that really is what he did. And when he had finished listening, he spoke about the proposal that would be going to Conference and that although he had little hope of it being accepted by all ministers, that it was an exciting document. He spoke of the years that the Methodist Church has been avoiding this issue, and of the need for the church to now face it squarely. And he spoke of his own determination that the church should be a place of love and acceptance. Then we prayed together, and, because '[r]ituals and celebrations mark significant steps in the journey away from a problem story to a new and preferred version of life ( Morgan 2000:111), we had a celebratory tea, with a heart-shaped 'Joy' cake. This was symbolic of the 'irrepressible joy' (Frost 1994) I described earlier being a catalyst for authenticity, and of our joy in communal resistance (Welch 1999:107). The Bishop stayed with us, and continued to listen to our informal stories.

Also at this last meeting, I provided each research participant with a rainbow (remembering that the rainbow is a gay symbol) bookmark with the text from Genesis 9: 16: 'Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth'. In this way, I sought to symbolise for all of us the integration of our sexual and spiritual stories. Heskins (2001:194) reminds us of the value of using symbol to retrieve a healing ministry.

But it was the letters that I received after the last meeting that meant the most to me. I have already spoken about the letter I had received from Theresa, in which she said: 'I am on the start of a great personal journey. I feel an increasing awareness of God's love for me, and this is almost too awesome to contemplate...' and later she

said 'in sharing your faith and joy of God's love you have given me a great gift'. Des wrote, in a note of thanks to me at the end of the research '[w]hat started out as your research has actually ended up as a reawakening for us. Thank you for starting us on our spiritual journey again.' These alternative stories of a more intimate picture of God thrill me more than any other change my group has experienced. In 2.3.6 I spoke of my commitment to prayer as the natural work of spirituality. Walter Wink (1998:181), the great activist states that '[u]nprotected by prayer, our social activism runs the danger of becoming self-justifying good works'. I neither want to be involved in a group that is merely self-justifying, nor do I want to be caught up in the 'counter ideology of some counter-Power' (Wink 1998:181). It is when profound healing takes place in people's pictures of God, that people are transformed by God. 'We are not easily reduced to prayer' (Wink 1998:180). But, when 'the spiritual is at the core of everything' then everything 'is therefore infinitely permeable to prayer'(Wink 1998:184), and 'we may see ourselves - and maybe even the world - a little bit transformed' (Wink 1998: 200).

When the group meetings had drawn to a close, I reflected on what it was that we had all learned, but especially what I had learned from the research participants. I realised that I had been true to the first part of my research question, 'to hear and accept' what it was that the research participants had shared with me, and so 'to validate the experiences of gay spirituality'. Now it was time for me to move on to the second part of my research question – that this contribution of gay spirituality help form a 'more inclusive faith community' (see 1.4). This required that I embrace the research objectives of reflecting on the practices of exclusion and inclusion regarding gay spirituality at Northfield, and encouraging practices transformation to include gay spirituality at Northfield (see 1.5). That work is the focus of Chapter Four.

## Chapter Four

### Gay Spirituality: A Challenge to the Church

*Patterns of ... pastoral care and social action  
serve as the 'incarnation' of the truth-claims  
of Christian theology –  
E Graham in Ackermann and BonsStorm (1998:134)*

#### 4.1 Introduction

In Chapter Three, I reflected on the conversations that I had with the research participants. I listened to their stories and explored their spiritual experiences in a heterosexual faith community. Together we co-constructed preferred stories of an inclusive Christian spirituality. Listening to these stories was a freeing experience for me, as I was able to see new ways of being, as Maggi put it, 'in love' with God, as well as with a gay partner. I learnt, along with Marshall (1994:74) that spirituality and sexuality can be dynamics that inter-relate, rather than which dichotomise. I learnt first hand just how life-changing Weingarten's (2002) 'intentional witnessing' can be. I experienced how 'as the conversation evolves, so do the participants involved, both listener and speaker' (Boyd 1996:56). As we spent time sharing our stories with one another, we all were changed. This is evidenced by the letters I received at the termination of our meetings together, and which can be found in Appendix One: Research Participant Texts.

And because the personal is always the political (a feminist axiom, referred to by Isherwood & McEwan 1996:173), my listening, of course, had to change me. Nurnberger (1999:223) reminds us that freedom is 'linked to responsibility'. Thus my own experiences with these women did not end with my own new personal understanding. Listening to and describing the effects of the exploitation does not constitute 'politicisation' (hooks 1997:536). I had a responsibility to do something with this knowledge. If I were changed, that would mean that my community would also need to be changed. Reflecting on this process with my supervisor, I realised that I had moved from participation in the life stories of the research participants in the group, to a longing to validate them. bell hooks (1997:354), calls this process 'self politicisation'. The women's stories had become entwined in my own, and if they were hurting, so was I, and so were many other people 'out there', who I did not even yet know.

As a result, I felt compelled to become involved in 'consciousness raising' (Freire 1998:18). I needed to help others, especially those as close to me as my own church

community, so that they could *benefit* from my own new understanding of the pain that gay people in the church experience. Reinharz (1992:220) also is interested in the concept of consciousness raising, seeing it as a way of changing our ways of 'thinking, relating, naming or acting', usually in small group contexts.

And so in this chapter, I move on to consider my research curiosities: 'How can a faith community primarily constituted by a heterosexual spirituality, hear and accept, and thus *validate*, the experiences of gay spirituality?', and 'How can a gay spirituality contribute towards *forming* a more inclusive faith community?'. These central curiosities were expanded into two more objectives: 'to reflect on the practices of exclusion and inclusion regarding gay spirituality at Northfield Methodist Church', and 'to encourage practices of transformation to include gay spirituality at Northfield Methodist Church'.

## 4.2 Reflections on Practices of Exclusion

### 4.2.1 Invisibility

When preparing for this research, a colleague commented that it would be difficult for me to find 'enough' gay people in the church to form a part of my working group. He was very surprised to find that I already had a working group of six, and that I had chosen to limit the group only to women, and only to women who attended Northfield Methodist Church. His ignorance of the numbers of gay people in the life of the church is testament to their 'invisibility' (Isherwood & McEwan 1996:112). One of the saddest 'practices' of exclusion is the practice of invisibility. This occurs when people have 'no real influence on the decision-making structures which affect their lives' (Isherwood & McEwan 1996:112). It is not so much that these people are voiceless, but simply that they are not heard. Because gay voices are not heard, many churches, as local institutions, feel that it is acceptable to 'do nothing' about gay Christian people, because they believe there aren't any.

### 4.2.2 Judgement

Other gay people who had been in the church, because they are gay, have chosen to not be a part of the church community. 'Knowing' the 'certain condemnation' that will follow their 'coming out' in church, many gay people choose to rather leave the church, and some never join it in the first place.

Hammond (2000:1) tells us that in Europe and North America approximately six thousand Christians are defecting from Christianity each **day**. Amideo (1999) believes that a significant percentage of these people leave over issues relating to sexuality. One of our group members, Pixie, describes her experience of this judgement in the letter that follows. A member of Northfield, she had been horrified by the degree of homophobia in the cell group (a home group) of which she had been a part.

*Lesbo, fairy, pansy, dyke – these are all common terms used by people towards gay or lesbian folk. The same people using these derogatory names are often Church going folk, and look upon themselves as kind and considerate people who would be horrified if they were accused of being anything other than upstanding citizens. However, they appear to have a strong phobia or fear of anyone who is different from themselves.*

*These people either hit out simply because of the sexual difference, or because of strong religious beliefs. The sad thing is – they very often feel validated in their feelings. We, the gay community are sick and perverted beings and they, well they are simply holier than thou.*

*The other sad thing is that the different Churches are doing so very little to change the perception that we are NOT sick and perverted beings, having 'abnormal' sex all hours of the day. By their strong silence, and in some instances their open hostility towards the gay community, the Churches are, in my humble opinion, guilty of the sin of judging. Does it not say in the Bible that we should not judge? Is it not God's job to do that? And who made the rule that simply because I love and care for someone who is of the same gender as myself, that I am damned? I take strong exception to that. Guess what? God made me as I am, I know that to be the truth, and God, as I have come to learn over these past three years, loves me. He knows the hairs on my head, he died for me, and I know that the God that I pray to and have a relationship with wants me to be happy. He doesn't want me to go through life on my own and lonely or worse living a lie, simply because homosexuality is viewed as a sin. The sad thing is, that for the most, we are very much like you – we hold down jobs, in some cases are highly trained, we have to go to work to pay off bonds on houses, we laugh, we joke, we have fun, but guess what –we have feelings too, and these can be trampled on and hurt by the uninformed.*

*I know of some young gay individuals of both genders that are going through, or have been through hell because of the idea that they are dirty and abnormal. It is so sad that to 'fit in' some of these young people will attempt to conform, and will either be lonely for the rest of their lives, have relationships that they hide from family and friends – and how, in all honesty can any relationship withstand that type of pressure? - or they will marry and possibly even have children in their desire to 'fit in'. Many of them will leave the Church. How sad is that.*

*It is so important that a new understanding is reached. Sure there are gay individuals that are scum – that have no conscience and go from relationship to relationship being totally promiscuous. I have to pose the*

*question however – are there not the exact same types of individuals that do exactly the same thing but are ‘straight?’ Just as there are caring people, totally committed to their partner in the straight community, so are there plenty of us who act and feel the same. Don’t condemn us for loving our partners, for being honest to ourselves, and for being the person that our dear Lord created.*

*Pixie 2003*

When Pixie first read the letter in our second-to-last group meeting, I was shocked by the emotion of her opening words ‘Lesbo, fairy, pansy, dyke’. Normally a quiet woman, these harsh words seemed out of place coming from her mouth. I had asked each research participant in the group to write something that would be a record of what it was that we had learned and experienced through our group meetings. The passion in Pixie’s words is impossible to conceal. It is interesting that of the letters sent on to DEWCOM for possible inclusion in their *Christians and Same Sex Relationships*, this was the one that was chosen. It certainly communicates the pain Pixie experienced of being judged by the church. When reflecting on what I, as a minister in the church, could do to really hear the problem saturated story (White & Epston 1990:16) of judgement that Pixie experienced, I wondered exactly what it was that she was asking for in this letter. It seemed to me that she was asking for nothing more than to be treated with the same dignity and worth as any other heterosexual woman. She was asking for the chance to simply love, and to be in a relationship and to be in community in a life-affirming way.

Feminists Isherwood and McEwan (1996: 115) say that to ‘do’ justice is to restore ‘the dignity and uniqueness of the qualities of knowing, loving and relating to life’, and that justice is a ‘radical activity of love, to a way of being that deepens relationships, embodies and extends community, and passes on the gift of life’. It seems from what Pixie has said in her letter, that the judgement that she has encountered is as a result of a serious flaw in her experience of justice, as it is defined by feminists. Her experience of judgement in the cell group was one where previously nurturing relationships were seriously damaged, and as a result the cell community of which she was a part shattered, and was soon disbanded. From the moment when the issue of homosexuality was raised, Pixie no longer experienced ‘love’, nor the ‘life’ that love offered. (Please see 4.3.1, and 4.4.2 for my response to Pixie’s cry.)

### 4.2.3 Rejection

It is the discourse surrounding judgement that keeps many gay people from even considering taking on positions of leadership in the church community or in the life of the church. Because of the difficulty entailed in being brave enough to be prepared to publicly live in an openly gay relationship in an otherwise heterosexual church society, it is sad that despite their strong desire to be cell leaders, and having done the cell leader training, Maggi and Carolyn were not allowed to be 'cell' (home group) leaders at Northfield Methodist Church. While Maggi described her reaction to this veto as one of frustration, and yet was not bitter about it, I felt that this action evidenced the reality of our church's views of gay spirituality. She has further expressed this frustration, this sense of being rejected, in a very practical way. While both she and Carolyn believe in tithing (the practice of giving ten percent of one's income to the church), they have chosen not to tithe to Northfield until the prohibition on their leadership has been lifted. She has not done this out of petulance or spite, but rather as an expression of her pain at not being perceived to be an acceptable member of the congregation. If her leadership is not acceptable, then neither should her finance be. In the meantime she is tithing to charity.

Only when we are happy to invite gay folk onto every level of leadership in the life of the church, will I know that we, in the church, have finally confronted our heterosexism. While this is my goal, it is definitely not the goal of other people in leadership in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, as was evidenced by the debate on the floor at the 2003 Conference of the MCSA .

Gay people in the church constantly experience rejection. It took South Africa many years to finally stop rejecting the leadership of black people. I do not expect the battle in the church over the inclusion of gay leaders to be won overnight, but I do want to share my experiences of gay people with the church (and will speak about my initiatives in this regard later in this chapter in 4.4). As a feminist, I value participation, facilitation and the 'hearing' of all voices. I believe, together with feminist theologians Isherwood and McEwan (1996:183), that as we all listen to one another, and stop trying to control each other, regeneration will result. As we share our stories, we begin to share our power, and the result of that, I believe, will be new life and empowerment. But I will need to go forward with my initiatives to include gay people more into the life of the church very carefully, even slowly, in order that all the voices, including the dissenters, are heard rather than rejected. It



has been painful enough to witness the rejection of gay people. I do not want exclusive practices to be a part of the process of including gay people into the life of the church.

Having now briefly reflected on some of Northfield's practices of exclusion of gay people, I want to move on to reflect on some of Northfield's practices of inclusion. Having done that, I will then consider some ways in which transformation to include gay spirituality at Northfield Methodist Church can progress.

## **4.3 Reflections on Practices of Inclusion**

### *4.3.1 Pastoral care*

Most of the research participants of the group had, at one time or another, experienced pastoral care from one or other of the five ministers currently serving at Northfield Methodist Church. It was encouraging for me, as a minister, to find out that during those conversations none of the research participants had experienced being 'condemned' by any of the ministers at Northfield. Traditionally, the church has been seen to both initiate and justify systems of oppression (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:10). This is usually the case, because of the 'prescriptive ethics' that most ministers come to counselling situations with, that give very little room for plurality (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001: 16). In fact, although some of the research participants had come for pastoral care, expecting a negative reaction, they had rather come away feeling uplifted and cared for as a person. Bons Storm (1996:17), quoting Moessner, says that women 'desire in their pastor "a theological presence, a listening, supportive, nonthreatened and compassionate presence..."'. It seems that the gay women in our group had indeed experienced this kind of pastoral care. Two examples will suffice.

It is interesting that despite Northfield's refusal to allow Maggi or Carolyn to become cell leaders, Carolyn, by being 'heard to speech' (Couture in Bons Storm 1996:11) was empowered. Because being listened to was a positive experience for her, Carolyn began to gain more confidence in her gay voice. This is how it happened. Carolyn had gone to speak to Schalk (one of the male ministers) because of the depression she was experiencing as a result of her business, at that time, being unsuccessful. She said that she had been impressed by his 'complete lack of prejudice'. This respectful conversation helped her to see herself

as an 'insider' at church. This empowered her to see herself, not as an outsider, but rather as part of the family. Today, she believes that the rest of the family have to make room for her! This practice of connective understanding, of 'weaving threads of understanding – listening, responding, all the while attuned to participate in a way that would heal and not hurt' according to Kotzé and Kotzé (2001:4), was certainly healing for Carolyn.

Pixie described being both comforted and challenged by her conversations with Trevor (another male minister). She had felt shocked and rejected by her cell group when they had discussed homosexuality, and she had come to Trevor to deal with that pain. The group had been inflexible in their denunciation of homosexuality. And yet she too, like Carolyn, in her pastoral care experience, developed a rebellious voice that contradicted and disobeyed the dominant socio-cultural narrative and its proper roles (Couture 1996:27-51). This resistance is evidenced in the letter quoted in 4.2.2, as well as by her determination to remain in the church, visibly, singing in the band!

As both Trevor and Schalk approach pastoral care from a narrative perspective, their emphasis on the development of personal exploration and deconstruction is strong. I tend to agree with Buchanan et al (2001:436) that it is this narrative approach that is so extremely helpful in dealing with the clash of sexual and spiritual identities that gay Christians often face, and that is at least partly responsible for both Pixie and Carolyn's positive experiences of pastoral care.

#### *4.3.2 Conversations*

Cochrane et al (1991: 28) tell us that as ministers, we represent a 'generalised perception and position in society'. He suggests that for most people this representation is 'taken for granted'. He illustrates how dangerous taking this powerful position for granted can be, especially in the light of the country's history of racism sanctioned by Dutch Reformed Theology.

Traditionally, feminists have seen power to be repressive, used 'to tyrannize and to terrorize, to rape and to kill, to alienate and to silence...' (Isherwood & McEwan:1996:182). When I consider my power as a minister in the light of this feminist description of power, I fear what harm, rather than what healing that power, as exercised in my conversations, might bring to the congregants at

Northfield. This feminist perception of power though, is contradicted by what Foucault has to say about power, but impacts my conversations just as powerfully. Foucault (1977:194) encourages us to no longer see power as being negative, that which 'excludes', 'represses' or 'censors'. Instead he shows us how power is that which rather 'produces' 'reality', 'domains of objects and rituals of truth' (Foucault 1977:194). For example, having once determined that sodomy should be outlawed (Spargo 1999:16), the church began to be able to regulate sexuality, and to produce 'acceptable' sexual behaviour. How did this come about? Foucault suggests that when gay people go to confessional and tell the minister about what they have done, they 'produce a narrative about his or her sexuality' that is 'not found but produced' (Spargo 1999:15). For the institution of the church, the confessional (whether functioning in a room alone with a minister, or in a time set aside for confession in the church service) operates as a visible expression of an invisible 'panopticism': 'the exemplary technique through which disciplinary power is able to function', where 'the subject of surveillance ...disciplines him or her self' (McHoul & Grace 1993:67). Under the 'gaze' (Foucault 1977:195) of the church's, and of God's surveillance, 'deeply internalised mechanisms of constraint' (Halperin 1995:19) are produced in congregants, and disciplined heterosexual behaviour is produced. This explains Des' decision that once she had acknowledged to herself that she is gay, she at first determined to never act on it. It also explains why it was so difficult for Maggi to finally claim her preferred sexual identity. Happily both of these research participants were able to resist (Spargo 1999:21) the power of these normalising judgements (White & Epston 1990:31), and claim their unique knowledges (White & Epston 1990:32) of what was right for them.

This power, that we as ministers exert, can be used wisely though. Whenever I have a conversation, I am deeply aware that it is never outside of the parameters of 'it is a Methodist minister who is saying this'. As a feminist, I long to use that power in regenerative, sharing ways. As a minister I want to use my pastoral power to do good to 'those over whom [I] watch', that I may 'nourish, ...give subsistence, ... [and] provide fodder and pasture...' (Carrette 1999:123) for them. So it is that my every conversation is an opportunity for growth, for dialogue and for 'mutuality-in-relation' (Isherwood & McEwan 1996:183). In this section, I will consider how conversations which have taken place in a variety of settings, from the fairly formal ones in church leadership, to the spontaneous ones I have had in

the car park, have had a role to play in this research, especially in deconstructing some of the practices of power outlined above.

#### *4.3.2.1 Management team meetings*

Narrative pastoral practices are highly regarded by all the staff at Northfield Methodist Church, and almost all the members of staff have at least a working knowledge of the concepts. We use these practices extensively, even in the ways in which we structure our meetings. The management team meeting is a case in point. This is the forum where 'business' decisions are made, and where each member of staff is free to share with the wider staff the joys and difficulties that their ministries currently face. The group has about fifteen members. It is multi-racial, comprises of men and women, young and old. The staff at this meeting have varying degrees of theological training, depending on their position in the life of the church. Because of this, and because of the variety of backgrounds from which we come, our opinions on every issue are as varied as we are. Because we value our diversity of opinion, we utilise the narrative practices of conducting individual interviews together with the practice of reflecting teams (White 1998:172). For example, one of our middle aged, white pastors interviewed one of our younger black ministers about his experience of the 1976 Soweto Riots, in which the black minister had participated. The rest of the staff 'listened in' to their conversation, and then responded to it amongst themselves. The minister and pastor were then able to reflect on how the other staff had responded to their initial conversation.

Changing from a more 'business-oriented' meeting, to this dialogic, participative format of meeting has brought a tremendous growth to the staff. These practices have assisted all members of our staff in finding different ways of listening and being, and have helped us to approach a variety of racial and gender issues that had seemed too difficult to approach before. It has fostered openness, because we all know that we will be 'heard through to the end'. This '[t]ransformation is the slow, steady process of inviting each other into a counterstory about God, world, neighbour and self. This slow, steady process has, as counterpoint, the subversive process of unlearning and disengaging from a story that we find no longer to be credible or adequate' (Brueggemann 1993:25). It has been painful to hear each other's stories, such as the effects of apartheid and racism on some members, but the listening and participating has been life-changing for us all. It is fostering in all of us a way of witnessing

and 'asking questions that serve listening', that allows for the development of an alternative story, but does not dictate what that alternative story should be (Weingarten 2002:8).

I subscribe to this dialogic form of conversation, with its practices of remembering, listening and describing the effects of the story on ourselves (Weingarten lecture notes 2002:8). I have experienced it as one of the best vehicles for transformation that I have ever encountered in the management of the church. I am looking forward to being interviewed at that meeting about my experiences with gay people. I hope that through it, as a church we may develop a greater sense of 'agency' (White 1991:38), and will begin to play a more active role in finding ways to make gay people in our church feel more like 'insiders'. I look forward to the life that that conversation will bring to our leadership.

'Life' is often generated in very informal ways too, and so I will now reflect on the effects that even my informal conversations have had on this research.

#### *4.3.2.2 Personal Conversations*

As a minister, I live my life in the public eye. Most of the congregation knows that I am studying for my Master's Degree, and most of them 'know' that it is in 'Narrative Pastoral Therapy'. More and more of them have discovered that I 'am researching' 'Lesbian Spirituality'. When looking for an easy way to describe what it is that I am curious about, I find this phrase 'Lesbian Spirituality' most helpful. It indicates initially that gay people do have a spiritual life, something that many of my congregants are surprised to discover. Stereotypes about whom God accepts and does not accept are also challenged by the simple use of this phrase. It reminds us all that the Christian message is that 'God is with us' and that 'Christianity has made God accessible to humanity, experienceable' (Isherwood & McEwan 1994:135), rather than being about how 'good' we are. In the simple use of these words, 'Lesbian Spirituality', I challenge stereotypes of gay people being promiscuous and 'wild'. Foucault refers to practices like these as the 'resistance' (Spargo 1999:21) to centralised knowledges that power produces.

Moreover, more and more mothers, aunts and sisters are confiding in me about 'Gayness' in their family, and there is something of a loose 'sisterhood' forming.

This is helping those who previously felt 'sullied' by their connection to Gayness to feel more included into the wider community. I took this connectedness one step further, and I have formed a support network, linking families who are struggling to accept Gayness, together with others who have accepted Gayness into their family. (For more detail see 4.4.2.)

The fact that Maggi and Carolyn are publicly a gay family, and bring their children to church with them, as a couple, is also the source of some very helpful conversations. When people ask me if they are gay, and how I 'feel about it', I am grateful for the opportunity to contradict some of the dominant discourses of the church. For example, gay people are not seen as productive members of society (being too focussed on their sexual lives). When I am able to tell people (with permission of Maggi) that she holds a doctorate degree, and is a university professor, that stereotype is dismantled! These conversations offer the deconstruction of discourses surrounding being gay, which make the construction of new ones possible. After all, as Nurnberger (1999:223) suggests, social change comes about on the *basis* of transformed collective consciousness.

Poling (1996:176) believes that 'solidarity with communities of resistance requires action', and that that action can take the form of words, but also of physical connectedness, and of emotional bonding. As I share with my congregation stories about gay mothers and their children sharing time with me in my home, I find that my solidarity with these gay women not only helps other people to know that I live my beliefs about the equality of all people, but also causes people to think twice about their own views.

#### *4.3.3 Other Practices*

De Gruchy and Villa Vicencio (1994:12) remind us that it is 'what we do that reveals what we believe'. As ministers at Northfield, we stand in different personal positions regarding the acceptability, in terms of Christian standards, values and behaviour, of the gay life-style. However, there is one thing on which we are all clear, and that is that Northfield welcomes gay people. That welcome works itself out in our separate ministries in slightly different ways. And so it is that I must reflect on some of the actions that Northfield does take for and with its gay people. These actions reflect the stands that we made.

In 4.2 I looked at some of the actions we as a community we have done to exclude people who are gay, such as not allowing Maggi and Carolyn to lead a cell group in their home. However, we have done a few things that have been publicly inclusive too, and I would like to mention these as examples of the transformation that we are working towards.

One of our worship services at Northfield is primarily lead by a 'band' – a group of musicians who lead worship according to a roster at that service. Two people who joined this group were gay, but were closeted. Over time, both of them have 'come out', at least partially. There has not even been any discussion of them 'stepping down'. Other gay people in the church have taken comfort from the fact that there are gay people 'up front', worshiping in church. This visible symbol of the inclusion of sexuality and spirituality is a powerful one, and signals a move in the church towards a greater degree of inclusivity.

Another way in which we have attempted to be inclusive of gay people is through our preaching and worship. Bron (in Anderson 1998:53) suggests that 'pastoral care needs the perspective of worship to avoid becoming stuck in a horizontal view of experience without transcendence'. As ministers, because we want to 'ground' our prayers in the lives of real people, we have prayed for gay folk, as part of our intercessory prayers along with other families, from the pulpit. Not only does this re-categorise gay people, it has the benefit of adding Bron's sense of 'transcendence' to what might otherwise only be seen as a personal experience of pain.

As ministers at Northfield, we have spoken about not excluding anyone, be they male or female, black or white, gay or straight from the life of the church. We have preached about confronting heterosexism in ourselves. Some of the ministers have asked the congregation to consider what excluding gay people from our church life does to all of us. We hope, that in these ways, we have helped gay people in the congregation to feel as if they may weave 'the stories of their lives', as they are, into 'God's stories as mediated by the community into a transformative narrative that will confirm their sense of belonging, strengthen them to live responsibly as disciples in the world, and liberate them from confinement' (Bron in Anderson 1998:48).

While there has been little response to these statements from the gay members of our society, angry follow-up e-mails and phone calls evidence that it certainly touches a nerve with some of our hetero-sexist congregants! Others, who have gay sons, brothers or daughters have quietly thanked us for raising the issue. I believe that it is only when unvoiced hetero-sexist attitudes are challenged in the sanctuary, that gay people will begin to feel safe enough to be included.

And so it is that I feel the need to start making moves towards doing something more that will bring about transformation of the church for which I share responsibility, Northfield. While my ultimate end-goal is that committed, Christian gay people be involved in every level of church life, I have to begin small, and move slowly towards that goal.

## **4.4 Steps Towards Transformation**

The very first step towards the transformation of Northfield had to be for the five ministers of this congregation to come to some sort of a position regarding the gay people in our church. So it was, that at a minister's meeting, we spoke about where it is that we stand.

### *4.4.1 Ministerial Discussion*

As ministers of the church, we know that if we continue in what Amideo (1999:3), refers to as an 'antiquated and erroneous theology', we will only succeed in trapping gay people into dishonest marriages, promiscuity, depression and suicide, or chase them from 'their mother', the church, forever. And so, as the five ministers of our congregation, we took some time out to talk amongst ourselves about our personal and corporate response to the issue of homosexuality and the church. We discovered that we all hold slightly different views on the subject. We did decide, however, as I mentioned in 5.3.3, that without question, we were a church that welcomes gay people. While it is unclear quite what that means in practice, and for each of the ministers it is slightly different, it is a common base on which we build. And so it was that I was given the 'go ahead' to take my proposal regarding forming 'Christians and Same Sex' support and discussion groups to the decision-making body of our Northfield church - the Board of Elders.



#### *4.4.2 Proposal to the Board of Elders about forming a Christians and Same Sex Relationships Discussion Group and Support Community.*

At the close of the group meetings, many of the research participants expressed a desire for other gay people, or their families to be able to share in a group like this. Des suggested that group discussions be available for teens struggling with their sexuality, or a parent-support group. Carolyn toyed with the idea of a 'special interest cell' for gay people, and Maggi suggested that we form some kind of a support network for gay people through regular, but infrequent (e.g. every second month), socials.

Concurrent with the ending of the group meetings was Conference 2003, the highest decision making body of the MCSA. At that conference a mandate was given to all churches, that they take the document *Christians and Same Sex Relationships* produced by DEWCOM back to their congregations for discussion. Then during 2005, these congregations could express their views on the topic by way of vote, at the grassroots decision making body, the Circuit Quarterly Meeting. The result of these votes would then be discussed at the floor of Conference 2005, and voted on there, if necessary. This added fuel to my urgency to begin discussion groups at Northfield.

Reflecting on what the research participants had suggested, as well as the fact that the MCSA had mandated the church to begin discussions, led me to write a proposal to the Board of Elders that we at Northfield start both a support network for gay people and their families, as well as a 'discussion' group. In addition, I requested permission to host these discussion groups in other local Methodist Churches. The fact that this topic of gay spirituality is the heart of this research added credibility to my ability to facilitate these discussions. The fact that my brother is gay added to the congregation's understanding of my passion for addressing the issue of Christians in same-sex relationships. I have included here a copy of my proposal to the Board of Elders. The proposal was accepted unanimously.

[Circuit Quarterly Meetings are business meetings, held four times a year, of a specified group of Methodist churches in the same region.]

## **Christians and Same Sex Relationships**

### **A Proposal**

*At Conference the Methodist Church of Southern Africa [the MCSA] was mandated to begin discussions regarding 'Christians and Same-Sex Relationships' in preparation for developing a formal position on the issue at Conference 2005'.*

*As a woman in ministry, I am indebted to those who fought the cause for women to be allowed to come into ministry. It was not a battle easily won, nor in some places, a battle that has finished being won. I have pondered hard on how to thank these women and men for their gift to me. The only possible way that I can thank them is to free others that have not had the options that I have.*

*I have a brother who is gay. He would play dolls with me while my other brothers played on a nearby farm. He would blow-dry my hair, while the other two were racing around the neighbourhood on their bikes. I learned a lot about compassion from him, and a lot about courage. If I can do something that will provide him, and others like him, an experience of respect and love from the church, then I will. I began by researching the issue at Masters level. Now I long to do something. The only place that I can start is here.*

#### **A. Northfield:**

*I believe that we need to adopt a two-pronged approach to this issue at Northfield.*

#### **1. A group meeting where the issue can be dealt with theologically - A Discussion Group**

*I see this as being a place where heterosexual people can express their fears, address their prejudices and think about Christianity and same-sex relationships. I would not encourage same sex people to come to this meeting, although I wouldn't stop them. This is because it may be too painful, for them to hear themselves being 'spoken about' in this way. It would also inhibit the freedom of heterosexual people to 'express any strongly negative feelings they may have. However, the stories of same sex people would be presented to this group, with their permission, and with reverence for the 'holy ground' of personal experience.*

*I would like the first meeting to be held on 13 September. I would advertise this meeting in the church bulletin two weeks before [i.e. 31 August and 7 September]*

*'At Conference July 2003 the Methodist Church of Southern Africa [the MCSA] was mandated to begin discussions regarding 'Christians and Same-Sex Relationships' in preparation for developing a formal position on the issue at Conference 2005. The MCSA Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee [DEWCOM] drafted a discussion guide to facilitate these conversations. If this is an issue close to your heart, or one you want your voice heard on, or one you simply would like to learn a little more about, then you are invited to a meeting at the Wesley Hall on September 13 from*

9:30 to 11:30. Please contact Debbie at the Church Office to book your place.'

*I would like to facilitate these meetings. I envisage them lasting two hours each, and being held once a month on a Saturday morning. I see us working through the DEWCOM document, a chapter at a time, adding to it with other reading, testimonies, and working in small groups. Much time will be spent initially working with our own models of ethical decision-making. I like the slowness of the process initially, as we need to move with great deliberation and care. People will need time to process their thinking. I would like to invite Schalk and Trevor to offer their perspectives on the issue, so that the group can hear many varied opinions, thus facilitating people's freedom to work out their own faith 'with fear and trembling'. Perhaps next year, the course could also be offered at Pathways (This is a seminary for lay people that the church runs in the evenings.)*

## **2. A group meeting addressing the pastoral concerns of same sex people in the church - A Support Network**

*If we are serious about the MCSA's call to 'be a community of love, rather than one of rejection', then we need to actively welcome same-sex folk into the life of our church as intentionally as we have folk of different colour. Traditionally, all over the world, folk in same sex relationships have been considered a 'abomination' by the church, and so they do not expect to be 'allowed', let alone welcomed, into the church. What a waste of evangelistic opportunity!*

*I would like to start a support group, meeting perhaps once a month initially, and then perhaps only once every two months. Both people who are in same-sex relationships, as well as those who are parents or family members of gay people would be invited to this group. It would be a place of pastoral care, but outside of cell (what Northfield calls its home groups), as we don't want to create a sense that gay people are somehow marginalised. People in same-sex relationships would be encouraged to be part of the 'main stream' of church life in every way. This group may take the form of a social one month, a bible study another, and a 'listening group' another. As issues arise for them to tackle, so we would tackle them in the group. I would see these either being hosted at my home, or in the homes of the gay people themselves.*

## **B. Circuit**

*As decisions reached by the Circuit Quarterly Meetings around the Connexion are the ones that will be heard at Connexional Level, it is essential that I take this process further than Northfield. I would like present the DEWCOM document to the CQM (Circuit Quarterly Meeting) to initiate discussions there to begin with. I would then make myself available to any church that would like to take the process further. I would suggest adopting a process something akin to the one described in A1 above, but tailored to the needs of the individual church. I already have the support of the CQM in this endeavour.*

Once approval was given at the Board of Elders, I advertised both groups in the weekly church bulletin. I have had a strong response to both groups. Maggi and

Carolyn made their home available for the first support group meeting (which was held on the 18<sup>th</sup> October), and the first discussion group meeting was held at the church (on 13 September). Already, I have begun some counseling regarding the integration of the sexual and spiritual stories of an individual's life, as a result of advertising the groups.

I am thrilled that so many steps towards transformation have already taken place at Northfield. However, this transformation of consciousness (hooks 1997:534) needs to go much wider than just my home church. As a result, I am looking at ways of taking it to wider forums, like the ones described below.

#### *5.4.3 Justice Task Teams/Church Consultation Groups*

I long to meet with church leaders in their home churches to facilitate grass root discussions around the inclusion of gay folk into our church communities. And now that it is 'mandatory' that the churches begin to address the issue of Christians in same sex relationships, I can do just that, without church leaders fearing that we are entering 'unsafe' territory. In order to facilitate these discussions, I have made myself available both to the authors of the DEWCOM discussion document (who are based in Natal) and the ISTEam (which is a Methodist Church group based in Cape Town, and who are activists in terms of sexual and other inclusion issues) as a facilitator of discussions in Gauteng, should the need arise. As a member of the 'Justice Committee' of the Highveld and Swaziland District, I have also made myself available to the convenor of that committee to hold church consultations over the issue of same sex relationships should the need arise there. At my request, I was granted time at our most recent (25 October 2003) Circuit Quarterly Meeting to address the subject of 'Christians in Same Sex Relationships' (see 4.4.2), and to encourage the circuit (a multiracial grouping of churches) to begin to go through the DEWCOM document. This request has resulted in an invitation from the youth in Wattville for me to begin to facilitate grass roots discussion groups with them. These Circuit Quarterly Meetings are very interesting, as they are a meeting of leaders from all the churches in a particular geographic area. Some of these leaders are from wealthy communities, and are highly educated, and some are from informal settlements, with no education at all. All interactions need to be translated into either English or a variety of African languages. As a result there is a wide diversity of opinion and understanding of the role of faith in community life.

There are many questions that the church has to face, if she is to remain at all relevant to a post-modern world, which is far more tolerant than she, and I hope that these grass roots explorations will be an effective forum in which those questions can be addressed. Brueggemann (1993:8) suggests that in the post-modern context, it is localised knowledge, and contextualised ways of knowing that have replaced the objective certitude of modernism. If in these meetings I can encourage people to access their own experiences with gay people, and share them, and if I can help people to relate these experiences to passages of scripture and church tradition, then, I believe we will have come a long way in standing up to heterosexism in the church.

However, we find ourselves in a similar situation to the Dutch Reformed Church over the issue of Apartheid. Our prescriptive ethics pronounced for many years that homosexuality was 'abominable', and now the church is being seen to 'change its mind'. The insecurity that not having an external marker for right and wrong breeds in our church is not to be under-estimated, nor is their resistance to the 'new' teachings, and those who 'follow' them (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001: 13-19). But when we are able to believe with feminists, like Isherwood and McEwan (1996:183), that 'power has nothing to do with control over another', but when 'it is shared, rather than being consumed, power actually regenerates and expands ... and increases when it is shared', 'making use of the interests, skills, knowledge and insights of the group', then we stop producing congregants who are confined by rules to obey. Instead we free people to live open to the possibilities of life. This is at the heart of the participatory ethics that I discussed in Chapter 2.

I tend to agree with Brueggemann (1993) that it is not up to the church 'to construct a full alternative world, for that would be to act as pre-emptively and imperialistically as all those old construals and impositions. Rather, the task is to *fund* – to provide the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined' (Brueggemann 1993:20). And so it is that I plan to bring to these meetings the stories, the songs, the letters and the miracles and healings that I have encountered in my journeys with gay people. With Brueggemann, I believe that these will be stitched together, 'a little at a time', into 'a sensible collage', 'all of us in concert, but each idiosyncratically'. McCall Tigert (1996:91) says that Christians ... are those who transform [pain]'. I pray that this healing collage is the 'new thing that God is doing' (Isaiah 42:9).

## 4.5 Conclusion

At the outset of this chapter, I sought to discover answers to the question: 'How can a faith community primarily constituted by a heterosexual spirituality hear, accept, and so *validate* the experiences of gay spirituality?' I think validation can happen in many small ways – like including gay people in our prayers for our community, and baptising their babies. We can validate our gay church members in larger ways, by running support groups and through offering transformative pastoral care. But it is only when gay people are seen in leadership that they will know that they have been completely accepted – and only then know complete validation. We need to do the theology that a gay spirituality requires, so that from this basis, we can empower our ministers and our people to be more accepting and thus form a more inclusive faith community. With the wonderful document produced by DEWCOM and presented at Conference we have no excuse not to share this theology with our congregations. I look forward to facilitating working groups around this document, so that gay spirituality can contribute towards forming a more inclusive faith community.

## Chapter Five

### Reflections on the Research Journey

We stand, blessed, before this stupendous gift  
the mystery of human sexuality –  
awed, confused, and rendered delicate towards  
ourselves and others as we seek to listen closely to the  
new things the spirit is saying to the churches (Wink 1999:1)

#### 5.1 Introduction

I began this research because, quite simply, I was aware of the experience many gay people had shared with me, that church is a place where gay people feel like ‘outsiders’. And so I set out, initially to consider the questions:

- \* How can a faith community primarily constituted by a heterosexual spirituality hear and accept, and thus validate, the experiences of gay spirituality? and
- \* How can a gay spirituality contribute towards forming a more inclusive faith community?

At the outset, I hoped that, in considering the above questions, this research would both explore the experience of the spirituality of gay women in a heterosexual faith community, and co-construct alternative preferred stories of an inclusive Christian spirituality. I hoped to find ways of making the church a ‘safer’ place and thus help gay Christian women to feel more like insiders at church. In Chapter Three, I recorded some of the stories that we shared together as co-researchers, about, among other things, integrating the stories of our sexual and spiritual lives. We deconstructed some of the unhelpful discourses that we had, and re-constructed preferred stories in their place. In Chapter Four, I reflected on ways in which we, as a church, have included and excluded the gay Christian women research participants from our church. I also considered some steps towards transformation that have occurred as a result of this research.

In this final chapter I will clarify what it is that I have learned through doing this research, as well as how the research participants benefited from it. I will then go on to reflect a little on what it is that I have learned from this research about gay spirituality, and how that has challenged me to think differently. From there, I will consider what I learned through doing research narratively, what I learned through doing research in a qualitative way, and what I learned through using a practical theological approach.

## 5.2 Reflections on who Benefited from this Research

From the outset of doing this research, I was quite sure that I wanted to do this research as an act of gratitude to those women and men who had paved the way, theologically, for me to be a woman in ministry. I had benefited from their work, and I wanted others to benefit from mine. I came to this research with my 'liberation' 'bound up' with liberation of oppressed people, in this situation gay Christians (see Watson in Kotzé and Kotzé 2001:4). I did not want to care *for* the research participants, but rather I wanted to care *with* them (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:6).

### 5.2.1 Research participants

At the end of Chapter Three, I expressed my joy that almost all of my co-researchers either phoned or wrote to thank me for the transformations that had taken place in their lives as a consequence of our group meetings. It seems that for them (as it felt for me) our group meetings were as much pastoral encounters, and even times of ministry, as they were research. Because I value integrity, it was very important that I was able to integrate my vocation (as a minister who loves to journey with people in their spirituality) into the research. Des wrote in a thank you card: 'What started out as your research has actually ended up as a reawakening for us. Thank you for starting us on our spiritual journey again'. Reading this, I was grateful that this research had been true to my narrative and qualitative research goal of the co-researchers not only participating in, but actively benefiting from the research.

Theresa wrote: 'I am on the start of a great personal journey. I feel an increasing awareness of God's love for me, and this is almost too awesome to contemplate...'. I was interested that both women spoke about beginning a new journey. Michael White (Wylie 1994:46) describes the therapeutic encounter as one that might *begin* with him co-authoring an alternative story, but that as it 'becomes rooted in people's own memory and imagination ... the story runs away from me [White], it takes over, it has no end ...'. It seems that this is exactly what has happened, in terms of the stories of the spiritualities of these women. Although coming to the group started Theresa, Des and her partner back onto their spiritual journeys, those journeys are now continuing without me. I am looking forward to watching how the stories of these women's spiritualities develop, quite apart now from any relationship with me.



### *5.2.2 Northfield Methodist Church*

One of the outcomes of this research was the establishment of two groups at Northfield - a Christians in Same Sex Relationships 'Discussion' group, and a Christians in Same Sex Relationships 'Support' Group. I have been thanked by many of the people who have joined both of these groups. They have expressed gratitude to finally have a place in which they can explore some of the questions that they are wrestling with. They have also expressed joy at having a minister evidence such 'solidarity' with them (Sevenhuijsen 1998:15).

Because the topic of Christians in same-sex relationships is one fraught with emotion, teaching on it, and discussion around it, has been avoided by our leaders. Knowing that education is just one step in 'consciousness raising', I am in the process of educating my congregation, through both of the 'Christians in Same Sex Relationships' groups. At those groups we study what some people have written about the topic, and we use reflecting teams to consider how the people in the group respond to this reading. In this, I am true to my goal of changing my church 'by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read' (Reinharz 1992:195).

While it is not easy for me, as a probationer minister (I have yet to be ordained) to begin to challenge the church about the discriminatory ways in which we treat people in same sex relationships, and even harder to begin to help Christians explore the theological basis for our acceptance of what has previously been considered to be sinful behaviour, I believe that it is ultimately to my home church's advantage to do so.

Firstly, we will all be richer for the diversity that gay people would bring to the church. Shallenberger (1994a:105-113) suggests that these people bring gifts, among which is their perspective as being marginalized. However, in this research group, Maggi and Carolyn refused to see themselves as 'marginal'. That was a gift to us in itself. Gay people also bring with them gifts of their comfort with ambiguity (as Pixie spoke of in 3.2.1) and their empathy for social concern (as Des describes in 3.2.1).

Secondly, quite practically, acceptance of gay people results in more volunteers being available to work in running the church. Corn (1995:217) speaks of his

experiences of a church in which gay people are welcome, and wonders how church life would continue to survive, should all the gay people in it stop serving there.

### *5.2.3 Personal Learnings*

This chapter reflects on what it is that I have learned from doing this research. I have learned a significant amount from the process of writing up this research report too. Sampson (1989:13) reminds us that a camera can film everything except 'itself filming everything'. I wonder how much more I might have learned, had I invited one of the research participants to interview me at the end of the research journey. Perhaps then with a change in my discursive positioning (Davies 1999:65), even more new knowledges and practices might have come to light.

One area that would have been interesting to explore, would be the fact that I am not yet ordained, and what impact that has had, if any, on the research and on the stands that I took. Nonetheless, in writing up this research, I have had a chance to stand back from what I have seen, experienced and recorded. bell hooks (1997:538, 539) tells us that autobiographical writing helps us to live our lives 'more consciously', and that it 'heightens self awareness'. This practice of reflexivity has helped me to 'link personal narratives with knowledge of how [I] must act politically to change and transform the world' (1997:538, 539).

My personal learnings did not only come from my interactions with the research participants. Many of my most profound learnings came through reading about gay spirituality and theology, and I will now reflect on some of these learnings.

## **5.3 Reflections on What I have Learned from Gay Spirituality**

While gay spirituality in and of itself is not the focus of this research, obviously, in preparation for this research topic, I read extensively around that subject. What I have read could fill far more space than is appropriate to give to it here. Instead, I will simply reflect on a few ideas that revolutionised my thinking with regards to being gay and simultaneously being Christian.

### 5.3.1 *A New Way of Defining 'Sin'*

As the debate around Christians in same sex relationship rages on the MCSA email network (MCSA E-mail Address: [minister\\_mcsa@yahoogroups.com](mailto:minister_mcsa@yahoogroups.com)) and in letters to the editor in edition after edition of the MCSA newspaper 'Dimension' (e.g. August, September 2003), it becomes clear that much of the debate is about whether or not Christians believe that homosexuality is a 'sin', in and of itself. People subscribing to a more conservative viewpoint believe that it is a sin, 'because the Bible says so' in, for example, Leviticus 18:22. Gay people are often faced with the question that Bob Davies found himself faced with: 'Would I obey God's Word, or seek to reinterpret it in order to satisfy my sexual desires?' (Davies & Rentzel 1993:21). And yet, when we do the work of exegesis, we have to accept that the question of whether homosexuality is, in and of itself, a sin, is not as clear-cut as it might seem (Brash 1995:39-46, Wink 1999:33-49). McClain Taylor (1996:74-82) asks how, if scripture is ambiguous in its condemnation of gay people, and if science is also ambiguous about whether being gay is 'unnatural', we can know whether homosexuality is a sin. He suggests that something is a sin when it fundamentally 'contravenes' good (McClain Taylor 1996:83). He takes what we as Christians take to be clear and unambiguous - God's gracious activity in the world - and interprets human fault in the light of that. He says: 'If one judges a practice or orientation like homosexuality to be sinful, one must show how that practice violates or moves against the good or is somehow contrary to the event of grace' (McClain Taylor 1996:83). He goes on to say, and I have to agree with him, that he has not yet encountered any expression of God's goodness and grace that is violated by 'full acceptance of the homosexuality of practicing gay/bisexual/lesbian persons' (McClain Taylor 1996:83). Shallenberger (1994b) extends the argument about homosexuality and sinfulness. He states that it 'is not the fact that I am homosexual that offends God, it is how I use my sexuality' (Shallenberger 1994b:141,142). I think that this is true of every part of who we are, not only our sexuality. When I witness the good that Maggi and Carolyn have accomplished in their lives, by adopting children across the race barrier, and in the ways in which they live their lives consistently with the biblical principles of love of God and neighbour, I cannot see that their lives contravene expressions of God's goodness or grace. And so I cannot believe they are sinning by being in a same sex relationship.

This approach to the concept of sin, as being defined by the ways in which it contravenes God's revelation of Godself, is one which I am sure is going to help

me in many difficult places, as I engage my prophetic voice as a minister, speaking out against all those ideas and practices which tear down life, and speaking up for those ideas and practices that build it (Fox 2001:49-95).

### *5.3.2 A Consistent Theology of Sexuality*

The more I have read about gay spirituality, the more convinced I have become, that it is not just that some Christians have 'a problem' with homosexuality, it is that we as a church have a real problem with our theology of sexuality in general.

An example of this is the way some Christians support their contestation that sex is intended by God for heterosexual life-long marriage only. Many Christians have taken the concept of 'procreation', based on the command in Genesis 1:28 to 'be fruitful and multiply' as the basis for their judgements about whether an expression of sexuality is 'right' or 'wrong'. If sexual behaviour leads to procreation and takes place in the 'right' environment (i.e. heterosexual sex in a marriage relationship) then, it is seen to be 'good'. But if it cannot lead to the production of more children, well then it is 'questionable' (and they see that this is typified by gay sex). And yet Whitaker (1996:10,11) shows us how absurd that basis for our decisions about the rightness of sexual relations is. He reminds us that we do not insist that infertile couples abstain from sex, nor do we monitor the bedrooms of couples past menopause for infractions of this rule (Whitaker 1996:10,11). If homosexuality is wrong, because it is an expression of love that has no possibility of procreation, then what about other sexualities, like celibacy and asexuality, that do not result in procreation? (Kelsey 1999:63)

Seow (1996:17) points out how inconsistent our attitudes towards the physical expression of sexuality are. He reminds us that although heterosexuality is indeed the norm in Israelite culture, other aspects of its sexual history have been 'rewritten' for modern Christian living. For example, we no longer permit levirate marriage, concubinage, or polygamy. He concludes that '[s]uch models are hardly adequate for Christian ethics (Seow 1996:17). Today, as a church, we are perfectly accepting of divorcees (all three ministers of Edenvale Methodist Church, for example, are re-married, or soon-to- be remarried, divorcees). Christ had a lot to say on the topic of divorce in Matthew chapters 5 and 19, and absolutely nothing on the topic of homosexuality, and yet it is the homosexual people, like Maggi and Carolyn, that we do not allow into leadership positions in the life of the church.

While reading about these many different ways in which we as a church are inconsistent in our application of sexual mores, I have become more aware of other places in which the church is inconsistent. For example, although the church claims to value children very highly, the finances allocated to ministering to them is often significantly less than the finance allocated to adult projects.

### 5.3.3 Diversity of Opinion

In early 1996, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A was in almost the same position as the MCSA now faces. Like us, they were anticipating a vote on whether homosexual people could be ordained or not. Like us, they feared that the result of the vote would 'split the church'. Duff (1996:156) describes her experience of some of the difficulties experienced in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A this way:

*'For one side, the loss [of the vote supporting the ordination of homosexuals] would be tantamount to being members of a church that refused to ordain women or African Americans. For the other side, the loss would mean that our church has lost its moral grounding in the will of God. Whichever side loses, that side will fear that the Presbyterian Church U.S.A has ceased to be the church and will contemplate whether leaving the denomination is in order (1996:156).*

Events that have taken place this year (2003), and are still unresolved have done little to encourage the people of our congregation (Northfield Methodist Church), who fear what even discussing the issues might do to the unity of the MCSA. While during the course of this year one of the diocese of the Canadian Episcopal Church decided to 'bless gay unions' (*Time*: October 20 2003:50), that event has paled in comparison with the events in the global Anglican Church. The gay priest, Jeffrey John renounced his appointment as a Church of England Bishop in Reading, as a result of church opposition to the appointment of an openly gay person. But it is the controversy surrounding Gene Robinson's election to the position of Bishop of New Hampshire, that is really encouraging the church world-wide to fear the effects of the debate that surrounds the questions of gay ordination and marriage. This fear centres around losing what church unity we still have. For example, Archbishop of Tanzania, Donald Mtetemela believes that it is not the conservatives who will split from the liberals, but that rather '[i]t is heretics who will leave the church; we will send them away if they do not repent' (*Time* 20 October 2003:50,51).

However, I draw strength from the fact that, throughout the years of struggle for democracy in South Africa, there were committed Methodists fighting on both sides of the struggle for independence. Somehow, during that time, prophetic leaders like Rev Stanley Magoba and Rev Peter Storey (who were during that time Presidents of Conference) took us on a journey, during which time we expended a great deal of effort listening to each other. Determined to stand in 'solidarity with all people who seek freedom, peace and justice' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa Yearbook 2002:85), we managed to forge a unity, while still respecting our diversity. We learned to know in our bodies (Graham 1997:228), in the very colour of our skins, what it is to *live* the gospel. I believe that if we could do it then with Apartheid, we can do it again on the gay issue. If we have prophetic leadership and remain committed to both peace and justice, we will be able to face diversity. As South Africans we are learning what it means to live the maxim 'unity in diversity'. And so I was not surprised that it is the Archbishop Ndungane of the *South African Anglican Church* who 'proposed that a commission be set up to study how the church might learn to live with its disagreements on this [gay] issue' (*Time* 20 October 2003:51).

It is my commitment to find ways of learning to hear each other, and so learn to live with the disagreements that have sparked my formation of the Christians and Same Sex Relationships Discussion Groups. In the two meetings we have hosted so far, there has been both diversity of opinion, and yet a commitment to respect. I believe that this is a significant step forward in the life of the MCSA.

## 5.4 Reflections on Doing Research Narratively

In 5.2 I spoke of my gratitude that the research participants had experienced some degree of transformation as a result of the research process. The research participants said that it was through listening to each other's stories that this transformation took place. If I were to isolate a few *narrative* practices that were the most helpful to us as co-researchers, I would also select 'listening to each other's stories', but I would add 'naming the problem' and 'teaming up against the problem' as some of the most helpful narrative practices of all.

### 5.4.1 *Listening to Each Other's Stories*

The first practice that I would like to reflect on as being very helpful was listening to each other's stories. We made use of the idea of reflecting teams (see 1.6.2), but we included some concepts from the A.R.T (Alliance, Respect and

Transformation) of listening too. Boyd tells us that listening begins with alliance (1996:58). As we took turns to listen to each other's stories without interruption, we allied with each other by beginning where 'the other person is' (1996:62), and hearing them out to the end. We showed each other respect by expressing our curiosities about each other's lives in gentle ways (1996:79). We listened to the ways that God was working in each of different lives, and we stood back, not only fascinated by the unique ways in which God leads us, but also encouraged to hope for the future, because of what we had heard about the past (1996:88-95). It was a listening to the ways that each other had deconstructed different aspects of the dominant discourses surrounding gay women in the church that cause so much pain, that seemed to enable each research participant to deconstruct her own story again, while she was listening (Boyne 1990:90, White 1991:27). And this deconstruction also seemed to make space for the generation of new meanings to emerge (see 1.3.3). For example, when Theresa first heard Maggi speak about the intimacy of her relationship with God, she said that she was 'awed'. She was amazed that Maggi could be so comfortable in her relationship with God, without rejecting her gay sexuality. But by the time that Theresa had arrived at the last of our weeks together, she said 'I feel an increasing awareness of God's love for me, and this is almost too awesome to contemplate'. This reconstruction of her relationship with God was made possible by the group meetings, and it has been a great honour to have played some role in accompanying Theresa on this journey towards a spirituality that was more accepting of her sexual orientation.

Because we all found using reflecting teams a helpful way of listening to one another, we have committed ourselves to including reflecting team interviews into the Christians and Same Sex Relationships Support Group. In this way we hope to show respect to more gay Christians and their families, and to ally with them more closely, in order that they may experience the transformations that we have experienced.

In addition, because of the transformation in the lives of the research participants, especially Theresa and Des, which has resulted from the use of reflecting teams in this research journey, I am also committed to use such interviews in the Christians and Same Sex Relationships Discussion Groups. Because that group represents such a diversity of passionate opinion, from conservative, even fundamentalist Christians to liberals, the use of reflecting teams helps us all to

consider our own opinions 'in a new light', something Reinharz refers to as 'demystification (1992:1922). In this way, I hope that we will all change, and all become better lovers of life, and of each other.

Using reflecting teams is also a helpful practice, because it insists on practices of respect. And as we listen to one another, mutuality is fostered, and we begin to establish a sense of who we are as a community. Heskins (2001:45) says that it is '[o]nly when a *community* begins to tell its story that that community comes to understand something of its identity, nature and mission'. Reading this, I asked myself how I could enable the rest of Northfield, and not just the research participants, to share in the story of gayness at Northfield. And that was when I first began to play with the idea of discussion groups. But, being aware that '[l]iberals are depicted as doubters of everything, loose in their theological thinking and generally unsound. They stand accused as those for whom...anything goes' (Heskins 2001:41), I needed to find a format that would protect the discussions from this type of conservative prejudice, while at the same time, help the church to find its story. I wanted to do this not only for Northfield's sake, but also because I had learned that '[a]llowing communities to reflect on their pastoral practice in this way is bound to have significance for more than just the local community itself' (Heskins 2001:45). This is particularly true for Northfield, for she is often referred to as something of a flagship for the MCSA. Already, the story of my research is filtering through to other Methodist churches, and I have received phone calls from other ministers and congregants offering their support and thanks for my engagement in this area of research and pastoral care. I hope that in this way, eventually, listening to the story of Northfield will help generate a sense of mutuality among those of us who are concerned about including gay Christians into every area of our church life, and that this will result in more gay people in the wider church finding places of inclusion.

#### 5.4.2 *Naming the Problem*

I think that another of the narrative practices which helped the group to distance themselves from blaming language was 'naming the problem' (White & Epston 1990:48; Morgan 2000:69). From the first week, it became clear that we all came from a very similar place, in that we all wanted the church to recognise gay women as equal members. It was Maggie who, in the second week of our being together, articulated this description of the problem: 'the greatest issue facing gay Christian women is how they interact with the problem that the *church* has... . All



the other problems that I face stem from this inability of the church to either accept my equality, or 'get over' my sinfulness'

In the third discussion, Maggie and Carolyn's experiences at Benoni East Methodist Church were used by Carolyn to describe the fact that it is the *church* that has the problem of discrimination and judgement, and not the gay women. In our following meeting, Des repeated what I then referred to as the 'mantra': 'it's not me that has the problem'. It was in this way that we all came to see that it was not 'the person' who had 'the problem'. It was 'the internalization of certain ideas about the self which circulate within a given culture' (Madigan & Law 1990:45) that was the problem. We began to call this 'it is the church that has the problem (and this implied for us the rest of the phrase 'and not us'). What we meant by the 'church's problem' was that it did not recognise gay women (in particular, but also other people) as being equal to its other members. The church struggled with judgemental ideas, and see gay people as sinful. I recognise that this could be seen to be just another discourse of blame, but for the research participants, this externalisation of the problem as being 'the church's problem', meant that it was 'no longer transfixing' the personal lives of the research participants. Instead, the discrimination of the church was something quantifiable: they could measure the influence that this problem had exerted (White 1991: 29). A practical outcome of this removal of 'the problem' from being located *within* the gay research participants, to being located at the doorstep of the discourses of the church, was our realisation that it was *the church* that needed to do work around the fact that they were 'excluding' gay people, not the gay people in the church themselves. Egertson (1999: 29) reminds us that just as disabled people are not required to take responsibility for building ramps into church buildings, so gay people should not be the ones expected to reach out to bridge the gap between themselves and the rest of the church.

As a result, when I hosted the first of the 'Christians and Same Sex Relationships' discussion groups (as I described in 4.4.2), I reverently brought the stories of gay people to the group, but did not ask gay Christians themselves to host the day, or take responsibility for it in any way. Although the exclusion of gay people (like the research participants) from church life in general is hurtful, and has effects on their lives, during the research we came to see that it is not 'their' problem, but rather the problem of discrimination that had entered the life of the church.

### 5.4.3 *Teaming Up Against the Problem*

Another narrative pastoral practice that helped was the way in which we all teamed up against the justice problem (see Morgan 2000:117) of discrimination. All of us were living with the consequences of the problem, and all of us wanted to be free of it. This sense of connectedness, that we were not alone, helped each of us to feel encouraged in our own attempts to stand up to the effects of the problem in our lives. Feminists like Isherwood and McEwan (1996:197) speak of a 'round table' way of doing justice, in which diversity and inclusivity, and authentic participation (McTaggart 1997:29) is valued. They suggest that it is only when 'power is shared' and a 'relationship of mutuality is achieved' that reconciliation is possible. Each person needs to have a place at the table, 'able to speak and listen in the community that they are both being and becoming' (Isherwood & McEwan 1996:197). Theresa said that the research group meetings had been very helpful, because 'we all have being gay in common'. Carolyn commented on the way in which her sense of isolation had been dissolved. She said that one of the consequences of being in the group was that 'it used to just be us (by this she meant herself and her partner Maggi) against the rest of the world. Before, we never looked at ourselves in terms of other gay Christian couples'. Maggie spoke of how she had been 'affirmed in her thinking' by this group. This sense of connectedness was obviously highly prized by both Des and Pixie. They spoke of how much acceptance they had experienced in this group, and how they want to be able to pass that acceptance on to other people.

And so I realised that the research was so much more than research. Because of my commitment to *participatory* action research, and because I am a minister, this collaborative research became an experience of pastoral care for all of us too. Gergen and Davis (1997:12) speak of research being relational. Peterson (1992:192) says that '[w]e need community to complete our humanity'. In our group meetings, the research participants and I did form a community of mutuality.

As a next step we have invited others to join us, in the form of our 'Christians and Same Sex Relationships Support Group'. We hope that that the new people who have joined that group will also benefit from an experience of mutual encouragement and connectedness that we, as research participants shared in the research journey. We hope that these new group meetings will be ethical in the sense of having an 'affirmative quality of kinship that no longer allows for privileged status' (Heshusius 1994:18). Once again, in that group, although I am

the facilitator, the agenda of the meetings, in every way is decided upon mutually, with each participant having an equal voice. It is hosted in the homes of gay people, that we may pastorally care for them by bringing the community of the church to them.

It was more, though, than just the narrative pastoral practices that allowed me to do research in the way that I chose. Having the option to do research in a qualitative manner also impacted my research in many positive ways. I would like to outline a few of them below.

## **5.5 Reflections on Doing Research in a Qualitative Way**

### *5.3.1 Research as Collaboration*

As I theologian, I believe that we have all been made in God's image – what theologians refer to as the 'imago dei'. This concept reminds us, among many other things, that we are all created as not just equal, but of 'unconditional worth', and worthy of respect for our diversity within a context of wholeness (Graham 1997:172 – 187). One of the things that I have enjoyed most about a qualitative way of doing research, is that it takes the fact that we are all equal so seriously, it refers to research as 'collaboration' (Lather 1991:69). This Participatory Action Research has meant that my role as researcher is no longer that of the 'expert' who qualifies and classifies (Foucault 1977:184). Instead, the co-researchers are the experts, as they are the ones with expert knowledge about being both Christian and gay, and it is I that approached the research with a 'not-knowing' attitude (c/f Chapter 2.2.2).

Coming to the research with genuine humility, not having to be 'in control' of the process, but rather simply being the facilitator of the process, has invited me, as researcher to risk telling my deeply personal story about having a gay brother, and the ways in which I felt that I had failed him because of the conservative faith that I held at that time. Reinharz (1992:32) calls this 'researcher self-disclosure', and describes how self-disclosure can invite equality and rapport between researcher and participants. As I shared my own shame regarding my judgement, I hoped that it would make it easier for the research participants to feel free to share their own stories of shame, or anger or disappointment, should the need arise. While I was never interviewed by the group as a participant member, I did begin the group by sharing my research curiosities and hopes with them. It also enabled me to ask

them what curiosities they were bringing to the group. I wanted to, in this way, from the outset, value collaboration and 'destabilise' (Reason 1994:328) any power relations that might stem from my being a minister, or from my being the researcher. At our first meeting, as a group, we began by identifying some of the discourses that we particularly wanted to stand against. Carolyn identified the discourse of Christian judgement of gay people, when she spoke of wanting to help Christians move from judgement to care. (This theme is discussed in 3.4). Des spoke about how she wanted to break society's discourse that reduced human sexuality to the act of sex. (This theme is discussed in 3.2.) Pixie spoke of her desire to change the discourse of the church when she hoped that 'this group might influence the way the church perceives people'. (See 4.3.2.2 for a further discussion of this theme). I spoke of the discourse of judgement that I had encountered within the wider church. (See how we discussed this in 4.2.2).

Throughout this process, I was aware of the ways in which my own discourses were being challenged by the group. Throughout this research, I have referred to the group as 'we', despite the fact that I am heterosexual woman. This is because I realised that I needed to be freed from my internalised discourse surrounding gay people in the church, just as much as they did. As I heard each of them say, over and over, that it is the church that has the problem, I was gradually able to confront my own homophobia, and replace it with my own preferred alternative story, that we are all equal in the community of Christ followers. As I allied with them, so I felt a strength come into my determination to ensure that the church faces this issue, and I found myself doing something I had not done before. I began talking about lesbian spirituality wherever I went. Reinharz (1992:194) says: 'Although changing the researcher is not a common intention in feminist research, it is a common consequence'. As I spoke, I found that the pain that used to only be theirs became mine too. This is what Heshusius (1994:18) refers to as 'selfother' unity. But also I read, and as I heard their stories, my knowledge and my compassion and my understanding grew, and I found myself, the wounded 'healer' being healed (McNeill 1994:324, Nouwen 2001:87).

This collaborative research began with the research participants hearing my story. It continued with me hearing their stories, and I have completed the research by telling others our story, both through writing up this research, and through occasionally sharing their stories, with their permission.

This value of collaboration was 'lived out' in my constant request that they verify all the letters that I wrote summarising our times together. I wanted these to be accurate reflections of their experiences. It was also lived out in my request that they read the final draft of this research before its submission in its final form.

Of course, feminists like Lather (1991:69) and Reinharz (1992:181) also value collaboration very highly. In the course of my research, I utilized many principles of feminism, such as the researcher being empathetic (Reinharz 1992:233), and research being a process of discovery (Reinharz 1992:194)), which had a strong impact not only on the ways in which the research was conducted, but also on where the research is taking me, now as I complete it. In the following section, I would like to reflect on a few of the principles of feminism that have influenced and still influence me.

### *5.5.2 Feminist Research and Activism*

In section 2.1.1, I spoke quite extensively about the integration of feminist research and activism (Reinharz 1992:175). When I began this research I only had in mind a desire to stand with gay women who had been hurt by the church. But as I progressed in my research, I realised that 'personal redemption cannot take place apart from the redemption of our social structures' (Wink 1998: 35) And so it was that I began to see my prophetic role as a minister as being one that addressed both individuals (through my initial group meetings, and now through my two 'Christians and Same Sex Relationships' groups ) and institutions (Wink 1998:35). So began the process of my connecting with three other groups within the Methodist Church.

The first is DEWCOM, who at the time that I contacted them, were in the process of putting together a proposal to Conference regarding Christians in same sex relationships. Some of my suggestions (such as including reference to a history of gay spirituality in the church into the document) and the letter written by Pixie (see 4.2.2) were included in that document. During the course of writing up this research, DEWCOM presented their paper to Conference, and it was accepted as a working document. This means that during the next two years, the church is mandated to take the document to the people of our congregations, and provide a forum in which they can hear what it suggests. In addition, the church is mandated to listen to the response of our congregations. This mandate has given me the

recognition I needed from my congregation to pursue the facilitation of grass-roots discussion groups around the subject.

The second group that I allied with is the ESTTeam, an 'Exclusion and Sexuality Task Team'. Their aim is to work with congregations to help them become more compassionate and then, as a result less exclusive. Welch (1990: 156, 157) makes the point that religious groups have unwittingly perpetuated race, class and sex oppression. In other words, she suggests that religious groups have perpetuated systems of injustice. She further suggests that we should see that justice is 'radically relational', and consists of 'rightly ordered relationships of mutuality'. The ESTTeam group aims to build these 'radical' relationships, so that justice can prevail towards all excluded groupings of people within the church.

Thirdly, being involved in the Highveld and Swaziland District Justice Committee of the MCSA is leading me to do similar work to ESTTeam within that capacity here in Benoni, once this research is completed. I already have approval from both Northfield and the convenor of that committee for this work to proceed.

This emphasis on justice is not only a focus of feminist research. Ackermann (1994:33) speaks about 'liberating praxis' as being a central concern of feminist theology. All contextual theologies (of which feminist theology is just one) value justice highly. I could not have done this research had I not had a deep understanding of practical, contextual theology.

## **5.6 Reflections on Doing Research Within Contextual, Feminist Practical Theology**

As a minister, my vocation traditionally calls me to work towards 'the cure of souls' (Peterson 1993a:56). This assumes that I know more about spirituality than my congregation, and it leaves the work of 'soul curing' up to me. I find that a crushing burden. I prefer the idea that one of my colleagues, Trevor Hudson (1999:20) suggests – that as a minister I myself go on, and encourage my church to go on, a 'pilgrimage of pain and hope'. This is when, as a group of people we have a moment of insertion (Cochrane et al 1991:17) into a community where deep pain is experienced. When we go there, we go as 'pilgrims, not tourists, as learners, not teachers, as receivers, not givers, as listeners, not talkers'.

Concurrent with this research journey, I am in the process of training for the ministry in the Methodist Church. Thus it is that my experience of pastoral work, and my experience of the research have necessarily interacted with one another. And I am richer for it. The MCSA's training of ministers takes Cochrane et al's (1991) 'theology for social transformation' very seriously, as the Bishop who runs the training programme was a research participant in the development of that material. During the first year of ministry, probationer ministers are placed within South African Methodist churches that are foreign to the minister's own culture. Just as Christ left the comfort of his home to enter the suffering of this world, so previously privileged people are taken to live in informal settlements and townships, and those from rural Swaziland are placed in wealthy urban communities. From the moment of this insertion into the community (Cochrane et al 1991:17), the minister is required to complete assignments that are a reflection on his or her praxis. These assignments are designed to develop an understanding of the culture, the social and church structures of the community, and a hermeneutic of suspicion (Cochrane et al 1991:22) as well as a reflection on the minister's own practice of spirituality and pastoral planning and care. It is, without doubt, the hardest year of ministry for any probationer minister. But what it accomplishes, is an understanding of, and a compassion for communities that the minister might otherwise remain in ignorance about.

In some ways, this research process has become a little like the MCSA's training process for me. I have found this research project to be a moment of insertion (Cochrane et al :1991:17) into the lives of the research participants. I have felt their pain, and I have experienced something of what McCall Tigert (1996:89,90) refers to as 'placing oneself in exile with Christ'. McCall Tigert says that 'to place oneself and one's community in the struggle for liberation and into conflict with the structure and status quo of power is to place oneself into exile with Christ'. Just as when Christ was crucified, he was literally taken 'outside' of the Holy City, and thus exiled, so gay people often experience being 'exiled' from the church. McCall Tigert makes the point that even the very 'rituals, sacraments, and metaphors' of the church (such as marriage vows and baptism liturgies) often exclude gay people, if not intentionally, then by a lack of attention.

In all of this suffering, in all of this exile, I have not ceased being a minister to the research participants, even though I have tried to destabilise the power relations that being a minister can create (see 2.1.2). We have opened and closed our group

meetings in prayer, and the group has, between meetings, attended church when I have been preaching. We have been in exile, but we have been together in exile. And now that I am just beginning to understand what it is to live in this exile, together we can begin what Peterson (1993b:153) calls the discipline of 'spiritual direction'. This is time set aside when 'we are in conversation with one another and spirit touches spirit, 'deep calling to deep'.

It is never easy to answer the question 'where is God when I suffer?', but as a minister in the context of gay suffering, it is my job to face the question head on. I think it is the world view which I learned from Wink that has helped me to be able to integrate this experience of suffering with an experience of God's love. Some people see the spiritual life as being an illusion, as being non-existent, with all that matters being the physical here and now (Wink 1998:17). My experience of God is too rich for me to be able to accept that view. Some people see that all that matters is the spiritual, and that we have to just endure this physical world, so that eventually one day we will be able to be with God in the 'real thing', in heaven one day (Wink 1998:16). I cannot accept that either, for I have to take cognisance of the suffering and joy that there is in living right now. Wink (1998:19) rejects these views for a view that he calls an 'integral world view' which is pan-entheist (everything is in God and God is in everything) and incarnational. Thatcher (1993:193) tells us that 'the incarnation of God in Christ says more about encountering God in the human body than any theory could express,' (and, interestingly, '[s]ex is, of course, a prime candidate for integrated theology').

Integrated theology assumes an encounter with God in shared experience.' Without this kind of a worldview, I would not be able to hold together the seeming dualisms of on the one hand, 'God loves me', and on the other hand, 'I am suffering', or, in this case, 'the church brings suffering to gay people'. In the same way in which I worship a God who was born to share in my sufferings, as a minister, I also share in the sufferings of those to whom I am pastorally responsible. I must take their context seriously. As I develop my own spirituality around an understanding of sexual diversity, so, when I consider my pastoral care of gay Christians, I take their need to be 'safe' from the judgements of other Christians into account. I critique those discourses and structures that seek to unnecessarily harm those to whom I am responsible, and I commit myself to being their minister, and so to help them grow in faith. I am thrilled that in some small way, as I described in Chapter 3:6 the research



participants shared with me that my attempts to do all this have not been futile, and that I have encouraged them in their experience of God (see 5.2.1).

As a minister, this research journey has also been a time of learning, of developing my understanding of the role of the church in terms of inclusion of gay people into every level of the life of the church. Being a part of a church that is clear in its acceptance of gay people on one level, but excluding them from leadership on another level, leaves me in an ambiguous position as their minister. Many of the members of our church are not comfortable with the liberal, inclusive position that I have taken. Many of them prefer the position that Coleman (1995:164) adopts, where he distinguishes homosexual being, and the doing of homosexual genital actions. Both the conservative members of our church and I are deeply concerned about the very real possibility of schism that might result from us looking honestly at what accepting gay people into every level of church life might do (see 5.3.3). My hermeneutic of suspicion (see 2,3,5) has led me to wonder with Richard Rohr (1999: 88) about how many Christians are concerned about religion for the sake of 'social control'. He suggests that, as a minister, 'to control' is not my task', but that rather the minister's task is to love God and love his neighbour, as we read in Matthew 22:35 –40. He goes on to say that 'As a general rule, I would say that institutional religion tends to think of people as very simple, and therefore the law must protect them in every situation. Jesus is exactly and consistently the opposite: He treats people as being very complex – different in religion, lifestyle, virtue, temperament and success – and keeps the law very simple in order to bring them to God'.

So it is that I have taken as my pastoral practice, a loving stance, that of Thatcher (1993:63) who believes that '[i]f the church is faithful to Christ, it will stand with the victims, for Christ himself was a victim of human sinfulness'. (In this case 'sinfulness' does not refer to homosexual genital behaviour, but rather a failure to live in love, choosing paths of selfishness or possessiveness instead - see 5.3.1.) Standing with the victims has involved, for me in this research journey, planning and implementing acts of hospitality, such as hosting the group meetings in my home. It includes helping others to remember that gay people have a right to a spiritual life (Empereur 1998: 24). It is this kind of re-membling (White 1997:22) or re-including gay people into the life of the church that will ultimately, I believe, facilitate the process of healing that the church's members, both gay and heterosexual, so desperately need. Heskins (2001:191) agrees, saying, '[i]t is the implication of re-including the excluded within community life that is a hidden healing dynamic'.

## 5.7 Conclusion

In May 2001, I was a delegate to the Highveld and Swaziland District Synod at which Bishop Peter Lee of the Anglican Church delivered a Bible Study on the Great Commission using Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:6-7 as his text. He urged us to encourage the church to do just three things. He said that as the church we had to 'look', we had to 'care', and then we needed to 'go'. He encouraged us all to really interrogate places of pain in our and other communities. He reminded us that this would cause us to care, and that we would end up paying a price for this care, because we would end up going to stand in solidarity with those who are suffering. This research project has been a commitment of mine to understanding, to 'looking' as closely as I know how into what it is like for the research participants to be Christian and gay, and in the Methodist church. As Bishop Lee said it would, that looking has caused me to care even more deeply than I already did. Knowing that others feel, with Theresa, that they are a disappointment to God, even though God is at their centre, tells me that it is time for me to begin to 'go'. As the 'Christians and Same Sex Relationships' Discussion and Support Groups (see 4.4.2) gather momentum, so they require that I spend more time in pastoral care. As the grass roots Circuit Meetings (see 4.4.3) begin to take off, so I need to find new ways to care with the new gay Christians that I will be meeting.

From when I was a little girl I longed to be a minister, and if I could not, well then, a minister's wife would do. Spirituality has been my closest companion for all of my life-journey so far. I have had another intimate companion in my journey, who joined me much later in my life, and that was sexuality. These two companions have, for the most part, been on good terms with each other. And as a result, our journey has been a very happy one. I can't imagine how difficult it would be for me if these two companions were to go into contest with each other. With Adams(1996:130, 131) I have experienced that the ways in which I have ordered my sexual life has signaled my highest priorities, my deepest sense of who I am, and who it is to whom I can be faithful and true.

Sadly, though, this research journey has shown that for many people within the church, for one reason or another, these two companions are at loggerheads with one another. As I reach the end of this research process, I find myself standing in the place Wink (1999:1) describes as 'rendered delicate towards ourselves and others'. The pain that I have encountered in the stories of the research participants, in the

members of the same-sex discussion groups as they struggle to understand a new way of doing Christian sexual ethics, and in the reading that I have done, has challenged me to live in a way that uses this knowledge respectfully. I truly believe, together with Adams, that as a church, we are all impoverished if we do not extend to all these holy sisters and brothers the church's support for their commitment to constant discipleship (1996:130, 131). In the last four months I have been allowed into the most intimate places of all; the confluence of the sexual and spiritual lives of my co-researchers. As a fellow pilgrim, I have tried with all my capacities to listen respectfully within this sacred space, not only to each fellow traveller, but also to what it is that 'the spirit is saying to the churches' (Revelation 2:7).

We stand, blessed, before this stupendous gift  
   the mystery of human sexuality –  
 awed, confused, and rendered delicate towards  
 ourselves and others as we seek to listen closely to the  
 new things the spirit is saying to the churches (Wink 1999:1).

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## APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT TEXTS

### 1. We have feelings too!

Lesbo, fairy, pansy, dyke - these are all common terms used by people towards gay or lesbian folk. The same people using these derogatory names are often Church going folk, and look upon themselves as kind and considerate people who would be horrified if they were accused of being anything other than upstanding citizens. However, they appear to have a strong phobia or fear of anyone who is different from themselves.

These people either hit out simply because of the sexual difference, or because of strong religious beliefs. The sad thing is - they very often feel validated in their feelings. We, the gay community are sick and perverted beings and they, well they are simply holier than thou.

The other sad thing is that the different Churches are doing so very little to change the perception that we are NOT sick and perverted beings, having 'abnormal' sex all hours of the day. By their strong silence, and in some instances their open hostility towards the gay community, the Churches are, in my humble opinion, guilty of the sin of judging. Does it not say in the Bible that we should not judge? Is it not God's job to do that? And who made the rule that simply because I love and care for someone who is of the same gender as myself, that I am damned? I take strong exception to that. Guess what? God made me as I am, I know that to be the truth, and God, as I have come to learn over these past three years, loves me. He knows the hairs on my head, he died for me, and I know that the God that I pray to and have a relationship with wants me to be happy. He doesn't want me to go through life on my own and lonely or worse living a lie, simply because homosexuality is viewed as a sin. The sad thing is, that for the most, we are very much like you - we hold down jobs, in some cases are highly trained, we have to go to work to pay off bonds on houses, we laugh, we joke, we have fun, but guess what --we have feelings too, and these can be trampled on and hurt by the uninformed.

I know of some young gay individuals of both genders that are going through, or have

been through hell because of the idea that they are dirty and abnormal. It is so sad that to 'fit in' some of these young people will attempt to conform, and will either be lonely for the rest of their lives, have relationships that they hide from family and friends - and how, in all honesty can any relationship withstand that type of pressure? - or they will marry and possibly even have children in their desire to 'fit in'. Many of them will leave the Church. How sad is that.

It is so important that a new understanding is reached. Sure there are gay individuals that are scum - that have no conscience and go from relationship to relationship being totally promiscuous. I have to pose the question however - are there not the exact same types of individuals that do exactly the same thing but are 'straight?' Just as there are caring people, totally committed to their partner in the straight community, so are there plenty of us who act and feel the same. Don't condemn us for loving our partners, for being honest to ourselves, and for being the person that our dear Lord created.

Pixie

**2003**

## **2. Gifts and Blessings**

The white crests of the ocean waves under a full moon,  
Dewdrops shining like jewels on the spiders' webs,  
The glow and awakening as the sun rises over the Bushveld.

A small hand slips into yours and a child laughs at an important unimportant action.  
The smell of home-made bread wafting out from the kitchen

The flight of a heron lift from the field, determined yet graceful,  
Glorious voices lift "How great thou art" to the heavens.

*Everyday gifts* are for me the greatest blessings. To see and smell and feel the greatness of God around us. As we are able to lift our hands to complete a task,

how blessed we are to do this. How many people are challenged and disadvantaged by lack of sight or movement, by lack of parent or food, by lack of love.

A good job, stable income, peaceful home, supportive friends - we are so much the same in our desires, despite our other differences. So many things we have in common. We all have our fights to fight, and they are all important, because they and us all make up the tapestry of life - from banning plastic bags to saving the rain forests. We all must care enough to fight for something and someone. Without the ability to care, we cannot really experience the full blessings and gifts that have been given to us.

As my cursor dances on this screen, I pause to think if I am closer to completing my task, the task requested of me as input following the group meetings we have shared with Debbie. As I re read this I thought I had got side tracked. But then I smiled and counted my blessings, and one of them has been the people I have met who have shared with me. Who have helped me come to this point on the road where I no longer feel disadvantaged and isolated. Where I can realise that I am blessed to be able to love, and to now have the discretion to love someone who can love me in the same way. Blessed to not let this one part of my being shadow the fights I must fight. Nor minimise my sense of self worth. I have been blessed to begin to see that I am not crippled, dysfunctional or 'perverted'. I have been blessed to have the support of courageous people around me, people who have the courage to still care for me even though I have challenged their perceptions and beliefs. I am blessed to be me, to experience all I have and to be empowered to achieve all I am able to do in my life - and for all this I give God the Glory.

The path I walk is one determined by God, he made me, and he has tasks for me to do, I have a purpose in life and hope I am able to be the best I can be - to His Glory. Part of that purpose, I now come to realise, after many years of fighting the harness, is to accept myself. To count my blessings that God made me has he did, and to trust that God had a reason, in the words of a wise person 'God doesn't make mistakes'.

### **3. A Letter**

Dear Debbie,

After little hesitation, I decided simply to say things as they come to me. This in itself made me realise that sharing within the church group is necessary and important to me. It is not necessary to make anything bigger or better to benefit anyone. I, as an individual, needed to look introspectively.

Most of my days are spent running away from myself using whatever tools may or may not be at my disposal - usually work, animals - time always not being available. Meeting with Debbie and all those people present in the group, was for me an extra - a plus. More importantly is meeting with God and thus coming face to face with myself. The people present obviously would make it easier, as friendships could perhaps build, in some cases rebuild.

I know that lesbianism in the church is not often discussed. Meeting on these Wednesdays, I realise was important. We have a place to discuss or be ourselves in front of the church as we are ourselves in front of God already. Talking about lesbianism is not the issue, being able to talk even though a lesbian is the issue.

A person who chooses to cut his hair short still may talk freely in the church, why not I. This was purely my realisation.

Thank you Debbie, for allowing me the opportunity to be myself and for bringing me closer to my God, who I believe orchestrates everything. In turn I thank God for allowing me to see Him in everyone, whoever they are.

Thank you to the group.

Bernice

#### 4. A Pair of Stories

Andrea's

Story



**O**nce Upon a time...

**T**here was a lovely young woman called Carolyn.

**O**ne day she went to a party and met an  
enchanted woman called Maggi.

**I**t was love at first sight, and from that day  
onwards they would talk and visit each other  
every day.

After a while they decided to get married. It was not a big wedding, but it was a very special one with all their special friends invited.

When they had been married for a while God spoke to Carolyn:

“I want you to look after my children” he said. I am making a very special little baby and I want you both to be her parents.

Mommy and Maggi were so excited and they went to see the adoption people.

The adoption people were also so happy and said they would phone us when our baby arrived.

Then God started making his special little child

He made her eyes,

Her nose

Her mouth

He made her smile

Her arms

Her legs

He made all of her very special and very perfect and put her in her tummy mummy for 9 months to grow.

Then one day the adoption people phoned. "Your little baby Andrea has arrived," they said.

**Mommy and Maggi were so excited and drove straight away to the home to pick her up.**

**She was so beautiful - a real gift from God.**

**They phoned everyone...**

**Ouma and Oupa, Byrone and Emile**

**“Yay!” They sang and clapped their hands.**

**They phoned Granddad and Grandma, Penny, Kate, Nicki and James...**

**“Yay!” They sang and clapped their hands.**

**They phoned Dams and Andrew who sang and clapped their hands.**

**They phoned Sue and Vince, Gilly and Mark...  
“Yay, we have a cousin!” they sang and clapped  
their hands.**

**Every-one was so excited. All the friends were so  
happy that baby Andrea had come.**

**Mommy and Maggi had a big party for Andrea’s  
Baptism and all the family and friends came to  
say a special hello and blessing on little Baby  
Andrea.**

**And they all lived happily ever after.**

**Liam's**

Story

**O**nce Upon a time....

**There was a lovely family of Mommy, Maggi and Baby Andrea.**

**One day Andrea's Granny called Dams, came to live with them and they all were very happy and loved each other very much.**



When Andrea was about 2 years old God spoke to Carolyn ...

“I want you to look after my children” he said. “I am making another very special little baby and I want you all to be his family.”

Mommy, Maggi and Andrea were so excited and the adoption people said they would phone us when the new little baby arrived.

Then God started making his special little child...

He made his eyes,

His nose

His mouth

He made his smile

His arms

His legs

He made all of him very special and very perfect  
and put him in his tummy mummy for 9 months to  
grow.

Then one day the adoption people phoned.

“Your little baby boy, Liam has arrived!” they  
said.

Mommy, Maggi, Andrea and Dams were so excited  
and drove straight away to the home to pick him  
up.

He was a special, beautiful, tiny, small, little boy  
perfect in every way - a real gift from God.

**They phoned everyone..**

**Ouma and Oupa, Byrone and Emile.**

**“Yay!” They sang and clapped their hands.**

**They phoned Granddad and Grandma,Penny,  
Kate, Nicki, Andrew and James...**

**“Yay!” They sang and clapped their hands**

**They phoned Sue and Vince, Gilly and Mark...**

**“Yay, we have another cousin!” they sang and  
clapped their hands.**

**Every-one was so excited, and all the friends were  
so happy that baby Liam had come.**

**Mommy, Maggi and Andrea invited everyone to a  
big party for Liam’s Baptism and all the family  
and friends came to say a special hello and  
blessing on little Baby Liam.**

**And they all loved each other very much and lived  
happily ever after .**

## 5. Two Songs

### Borderline

You are the borderline  
Cross over me  
Around the corner  
These crossroads unfold

These borders are fading  
Land unexpected  
I am territory unclaimed  
Until you pass through these gate

*Here lie the valleys of my mind  
And the heart of a faithful child  
My soul was hidden from the unknowing crowd  
Come and see me now*

We'll explore never ending horizons  
And try not to look back  
Cross over with me now  
Take my hand

### **Find Your Home**

Find your home  
Only there will you be safe  
Find your home  
Only there will you be loved  
Find your home  
Only there will you be understood  
Only there will you find what you've been looking for

*Only there will you be able to cry  
Only there will your heart learn to smile  
Only there will be an open door  
Only there will be me  
Waiting for you*

Find your home  
Only there will the clouds be blown away  
Find your home  
Only there will your soul fly to the sun  
Find your home  
Only there will your feet be on the ground  
Only there will you feel that you can truly grow

## **Christians in Same Sex Relationships: A Theological and Biblical Defense**

Many people in same sex relationships have found themselves discriminated against and confined to supportive roles in church ministry. Much of this discrimination has been justified using the Bible and Christian Theology. This document seeks to put the role of gay and lesbian people in the church in a different light, and seeks to encourage them to take up their rightful place, as God's called and chosen instruments in the world. John Wesley encourages us to use the quadrilateral of Scripture, 'Reason', 'Tradition', and Experience as ways of discerning truth. Let's explore this issue under those headings.

### **Scripture**

While the Bible is clear in its denunciation of same sex relationships, it was also seen to be clear in its support of slavery, and its insistence on the submissive role of women. Today we have recognised that neither slavery nor patriarchy are at the heart of what God desires for His people. We had to read the 'proof texts' that affirmed slavery (and the texts that denied women the right to be ordained) in

the light of the context of the rest of the Bible, as well as in the light of the progressive revelation of scripture. Just as Jesus reinterpreted the Mosaic law for His time, and Peter reinterpreted the food laws and the law of circumcision for his time, so many scholars would like to suggest that it is the homosexual issue that needs to be reinterpreted in our time.

Firstly, Jesus is clear in His affirmation of the dignity and sacred worth of all people, especially those who have been the victims of discrimination and abuse as undoubtedly the gay community has been. Despite the fact that it made him ritually 'unclean', or exposed him to illness, Christ repeatedly showed how much he valued all people, by touching the sick, the lepers, the woman with an issue of blood, even the dead. He told us that it is not what goes into someone that makes them unclean, but what comes out of them. (Mark 7:15-20) This inclusion shocked the exclusivist traditions of the Pharisees. The Bible is unambiguous in its call for us to be a community of inclusive love rather than a community of rejection, judgement or exclusion. Our admission into this community is based solely on our affirmation of faith, and not in good works (Eph 2:8).

Secondly, we need to understand that what we today recognise as being sexually ethical, differs vastly from what was considered sexually ethical in biblical times. This is true of both the Old and New Testament times. For example, today we don't stone adulterers, or allow levirate marriage, or forbid sexual intercourse during the seven-day period of a woman's menstruation. We need to be consistent in our application of biblical sexual ethics. For example in Mark 10:2-12, Jesus spoke quite strongly against divorce, but we allow even our ministers to divorce and to remarry. Jesus didn't say a word about homosexuality, and yet we will not allow gay people to play any role in the life of the church at all. For a detailed exploration of the passages of scripture that 'condemn' homosexuality, please consider the chapter by Paul Germond in *Aliens in the Household of God* David Philip Cape Town 1997

### **Tradition**

While homosexuality has been considered 'wrong' for almost all of church history, John Boswell's research shows that throughout church history there has been a strand of tradition in which same sex relationships have been considered

'normal'. For example, he quotes from letters from many Bishops who speak of their comfortableness and joy in their own same sex relationships.

### **Reason**

There has been a great interest in the study of human sexuality in the last forty or so years. We have discovered that a person's sexual orientation is influenced by a combination of biological, psychological, social and cultural forces. As a result, there is more of a variety of sexual expression than we at first thought, or that are spoken of in scripture. Since 1994, the South African government has recognised that people in same-sex relationships, as well as heterosexual people, have rights, which have now been extended to include medical aid policies, immigration, inheritance, and the adoption of children. However these relationships should 'look', scripture is clear in its call to all people to live in faithful relationships of love, trust and mutual service and care. Dare we exclude same sex relationships from this biblical injunction?

### **Experience**

One could fill a library with stories of Christians who have been undergone shock therapy, exorcism, psychotherapy and drug treatments in order to be 'cured' of their same sex attractions. Few have succeeded. Many have left the church, finding it impossible to be active in church life and comfortable in their own sexuality. Can we be seen to be Christian by the way in which we have loved our brothers and sisters in same-sex relationships?

Dear Debbie

Just a note to say thank you for sharing this experience with us. Thank you for your acceptance and openness. What started out as your research has actually ended up as a re awakening for us. Thank you for starting us on our spiritual journey again

lots of love

Des and Kim

30 May 2003



Dear Debbie,

I want to thank you for the opportunity of sharing in this experience. I did not initially have strong feelings either way about the project, and only through a curiosity or calling (perhaps) and insistence on the part of Maggie did I agree to attend as a 'visitor'. Being a Catholic, I also felt that I did not really have a right to participate or comment on Methodist teachings or preachings, and felt a bit like a gate-crasher at a party.

I feel the need to share with you, as the catalyst, the benefits that I have received from attending these meetings.

Expanding on something Des said the other night about how acceptance from non-gay people is in all honesty more important than acceptance from gay people, you have been very fair and open in your leadership of the group - this has been appreciated by me. It was also encouraging that you were also 'surprised' at some of the things shared, as was I (your facial control is very good!). Of great value to me is that you were able to share with us not only as a 'straight' woman but also as a minister (whose sermons I find very meaningful). This is something that I found very helpful.

These meetings, listening to other people relate their stories, where the focus was on God and the church, as much as on our sexuality and the difficulties involved, has been enlightening for me. I have experienced a great deal of self-growth. I have also experienced an awareness of the root of my own lack of peace (and distance from God), as a result of listening to the participants and to you.

I have come to realise that as much as I am not 'out of the closet', and certainly have no desire to hurt those I care about, that my greatest difficulty with this issue is really between me, the church and God. I have difficulty in reconciling with myself and my feelings, not because of society, or peoples' perceptions, but because of how, through the Church (and hence society) I have perceived how God sees me. This has been very negative and destructive in my life.

I have now seen God, and myself from another view point. I have had glimpses in the past, a comment from Father Chris etc. This part of my being, has really kept me from God and this has been a source of great sadness and anger in my life, particularly as this is not something I am able to change.

I have a sense that 'gate-crashing' this project has been meant, and that I am on the start of a great personal journey. I feel an increasing awareness of Gods' love for me, and this is almost too awesome to contemplate, to allow myself to feel and is rather difficult to describe.

Thank you for your perception, directness and understanding. In sharing your faith and joy of God's love you have given me a great gift. I wish you continued success and blessings in your endeavours.

Theresa

## **BECOMING A NAAMAN HEALING COMMUNITY**

**Scripture Reading: 2 Kings 5: 1-19      Date: 2/03/2003 [unedited]**

We are given his entire CV in the first verse of our Old Testament text. We are given his entire CV in a single verse. Naaman - his name; the commander of the Syrian army under the King of Aram – his profession; a five star general – a victorious one at that, with a medal on his chest, for every victory under his belt. He was respected and considered a great man. Every other soldier snapped to attention when Naaman walked by. And what's more, he was held in high favour by his master, the King, who certainly would have been one of the references on his CV, testifying that Naaman was indeed a mighty, mighty warrior.

He had a shining, shining public record, that anyone would be envious of, but that was not the final word on his CV. Right at the end of verse one, we read – “this man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy”. These last three words, referring to Naaman's hidden hurt – “suffered from leprosy” - had the potential to unpick the entire list of his honoured achievements. This private revelation of his

skin disease, beneath his shiny armour, (summed up in just three words), threatened to stain all the previous pages of the prestigious public record of his life.

The reason for this is simple – in those days, physical disease carried with it social stigma, and social stigma carried with it the price of alienation and estrangement. Put simply – what Naaman's wealth and rank could provide for him, his disease threatened to deny him. His hidden hurt threatened to close the very doors that his success had opened for him.

So in the very first verse, we are not only introduced to Naaman the successful soldier, we are also introduced to Naaman the silent sufferer. We are introduced to the tension that existed between the truth of his public life on the one hand, and the truth of his private life on the other hand. Both aspects of his life were real. To take one on its own – any one, it doesn't matter which, was to distort the full truth of his life.

Naaman was a good soldier, but he was also sick. Naaman was sick, but he was also a good soldier. And between these two truths of his being, existed a terrible tension as he anxiously sort to prevent the one from swallowing up the other. It must have left him anxious and fearful – even as a mighty warrior – this tension must have left him fearful – fearful of being found out – fearful of being misunderstood – fearful of being judged and finally cast out. – that's the fear that he carried.

And a secret is a lonely and heavy burden to carry. And I guess Naaman must have often thought that he was just living a lie – that his life was a lie. Every time someone praised him for his public achievements, he heard the whispers of his private life. As he presented his shiny strength for the outside world to see – all the while he felt the unseen sores of his flesh throb.

But let me ask you – who of us here today does not share these two aspects of Naaman's life? Who of us doesn't share these two aspects of his life? Anyone? If our CV's were written with the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, who of us would not have at least three words written in them that spoke of our hidden hurts? Anyone? Anyone here not able to identify with Naaman? I have a feeling

that most of us can – if not all the time, then some of the time. In fact I want to suggest that from the very first verse of our lives, we carry the hidden hurt of the tension between our public life on the one hand, and our private life on the other. The one pulling or betraying the other all the time

On the public stage of our life we proudly present our achievements – a happy marriage, a loving family, a successful business and we enjoy the public favour and acceptance that that brings – all the while, privately backstage, behind the curtains, we nurse our festering sores of misunderstanding and resentment in our marriages – cold silence within our families, and debt or exploitation in our businesses. And I guess if we are aware of it, we are tired – tired of living the lie – tired of keeping one from being revealed, exposed, known – because the one threatens to swallow up the rest of our life.

And so we continue living the lie, because of our fear of what it will mean to us if it is exposed, and we end up just exhausted from the burden of this secret. And we are as sick as our secrets.

Now the important thing to realise, is that both aspects of our life are real. If you take one on its own – anyone and it doesn't matter which, it's to deny the truth of our life – and to deny the truth of our life keeps us forever captive – a prisoner – bound, chained, not free.

And there's such a strong temptation for us to deny one side of our life or the other. Some of us in arrogance, are tempted to deny the festering sores of our private lives, while others of us in despairing depression, are equally tempted to deny the fruitfulness and wealth of any of our achievements. It's as if we can enter into such a gloomy, dark place that we cannot see one decent, good thing about our life at that moment. All we see is the private shame and sore.

And so the temptation is to paint ourselves with one brush – be it the brush of success or the brush of sickness. And that's not the truth of who we are. The truth is that ALL of us carry both public honour and private shame, and some of us also carry public shame and private honour. Both aspects are REAL parts of our life. That all of us, all of the time, are both saint and sinner.

Now what are we to do with tension? Henri Nouwen writes *'the act on the stage of our life, will probably always look better than what goes on behind the curtains'*. *Now that's not a bad beginning to just accept that. That's probably what it's going to be like in our lives. But – he says – as long as we are willing to face it, to face the contrast and struggle, (i.o.w. to minimise the gap between public and private presentation) – then this tension can serve to keep us humble. (i.o.w. this tension, that knowing that all is not well – regardless of what other people think of us – knowing that – admitting to that – and struggling to bridge the gap, humbles us – and that humility can be a means of God's grace to us.)*

Now – to face this contrast in our life – to struggle against this tension – is exactly what God enabled Naaman to do. Listen to the next verse. Now the Aramians - on one of their cross border raids, had taken a young girl, captive from the land of Israel, and she was Naaman's wife's servant. And one day she said to her mistress – if only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria – Samaria was the capital of North Israel – that prophet would cure him of his leprosy.

Now isn't it amazing how God chose to make God's self available to Naaman. Did you get that? How God approached Naaman. God came to Naaman through a servant girl. God came to Naaman through a captured servant girl. God came to Naaman through a captured servant girl, who had been abducted from her land and family to serve the enemy of her people.

Now we are not told her name. But I think we can be quite confident to guess. I think her name was 'Grace'. A little girl by the name of Grace. It must have been Grace. For there is no hint of bitterness or resentment within her - which would have been understandable considering her captured circumstances. We would surely have not been surprised, if this girl had attempted to sabotage Naaman. We wouldn't have been surprised. In fact I bet you she would have got our vote of support. But there's no hint of that in her life. I'm convinced her name was Grace. She spoke only words of compassion and care from her mouth.

In this we realise that before she was Naaman's wife's servant, she was God's servant. She speaks so that God will be known. That's why she opens her mouth.

She speaks openly about Naaman's secret. She names the un-nameable and what is more, she points to the one who will enable healing – Elisha the prophet of the living Lord. She speaks the truth in love – did you notice that. She doesn't expose his hidden hurt in order to destroy him. She could have done that easily. She could have just leaked some of his stained clothing to the press – you know how it's done? There are some presidents who just wish that wasn't the case! She could have leaked it to the press but not Grace – she speaks the truth in love – in other words, she speaks the truth, hoping that healing will come. She speaks not to break Naaman down, but to build him up – to restore him – to renew him. Her captor – her enemy. This is Grace – this is enemy forgiving love in action – grace.

Naaman was not an Israelite – he wasn't even a believer – in fact Naaman was a foreigner and a threat and an enemy soldier who had inflicted much pain upon the people of Israel and he remained a living memory of their living hell. They feared Naaman. And as the military leader of the enemy of the people of Israel, Naaman must have been the most unlikely and undeserving candidate to be healed by the God of Israel. Now I bet you, that if we had taken a survey of the people of Israel at that time, we would have got a unanimous cry for the death sentence for Naaman – everyone knew that Naaman deserved punishment and not healing.

How many Palestinians would be welcomed in Israel to be healed today? How many Israelis would be welcomed in Palestine to be healed today? How many Americans would be welcomed in Iraq to be healed today? How many Iraqis would be welcomed in America to be healed today? This is amazing stuff – that Naaman encounters God's grace through a captive servant girl – all evidence pointed to the fact that Naaman should be excluded from God's blessing – yet surprise, surprise Naaman is included in God's blessing.

As St. Paul would write later to the Christians in Rome that God proves God's love – how? – , in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us – while we were still enemies of God, we were reconciled to God through the death of God's son – while we were enemies.

God, you see, is an enemy loving God. God loves those who least deserve it. Now Naaman's encounter with Grace, starts him on a journey towards healing. In his

encounter with Grace, he is lifted above his fear and his pride. Those are two things we always need to be lifted above, if we are going to be healed – fear and pride. We have to overcome the fear that the exposure brings us through confession. It always exposes us - and that knocks on the door of our pride. And so unless we overcome fear and pride, we are never healed – we never receive the healing that's freely offered. So it is in the truthful loving acceptance of Grace, that Naaman finds the freedom to confess his hidden hurt, which edges him towards healing

Now we must resist thinking that Naaman was healed instantly – he wasn't. It took 14 verses of scripture before he was healed – and a long journey. (A journey back into enemy territory – not to hurt them but to be healed by them!!) The journey towards healing for Naaman hinged around his continued trust and mistrust in grace. He would accept the grace and move towards healing, and then he would become suspicious of it again and think - what I really need is a letter to the King of Israel – that's what I really need if I'm going to be healed – cos that's where power and wealth are located, and surely my healing is located in power and wealth. Just a little more money and a little more influence and we'll be healed – isn't that right?

So he mistrusts grace - and as he mistrusts grace he goes to the wrong places for healing, and nearly misses out. And then he's brought back onto the road, as he begins to trust grace again – Elisha's invitation to come to him – he arrives there and suddenly again, he begins to mistrust the simplicity of grace. He wanted Elisha to come out and kind of say abracadabra and wave his hands over the sore and that way be healed, and Elisha just says – listen broe, go and wash yourself in the Jordan and you'll be clean. He cannot trust the simplicity of grace. And so he dismisses it. He says we've got cleaner and better rivers back home than you've got in Israel. Until one of his servants speaks again – you see how God uses servants to speak the truth! But sir you know if he'd given you something complicated to do you would have done it – so why don't you just do the simple thing – go wash and be clean.

And in humility Naaman again begins to trust grace – put his pride and fear in his pocket and he's healed.

You see Naaman wanted to be healed, but he wanted to be healed on his own terms. He wanted to be healed, but he wanted to dictate to God how to heal him. And God wouldn't have that. So finally he comes to the realisation that he will be cleansed and made whole only through the generosity of God's grace – nothing else.

I think, that for Naaman,, a free gift was the most difficult thing for him to receive. A free gift for many of us is the most difficult thing to receive.

I visited someone in hospital on Friday – he must be in his forties – once divorced, now re-married. He told me that only now he's beginning to trust that his wife loves him freely, completely, unconditionally. And you can see the life it's bringing him – it's healing him. I think for so many of us, the hardest thing for us to receive is a free gift, of unmerited, unconditional love.

So let me ask you two questions now. Can you identify with Naaman? Can you admit, or name your hidden hurt? Can you give expression to the tension between your private life and your public life? Can you speak of the sadness beneath your smile? Can you speak of the madness within your marriage? Can you speak of the fear within your family? And will you notice how God comes to us? God comes to us in and by grace. The God from whom no secrets are hid comes offering enemy loving forgiveness.

Are you and I today, able to recognise that we re the most undeserving recipients of the grace of God – like Naaman was then? That we don't deserve it at all - that we are the most unlikely recipients of God's grace, because of this huge discrepancy between our private and our public life.

Are we able to align ourselves with Naaman in this truth – that you and I like Naaman also hurt God's people, maybe not as a military commander, but we've hurt people around us who happen to be God's children. And that we carry a tired tension – an exhausted 'living a lie'?

Because to the extent that we can identify with Naaman is to the extent that we will appreciate the extravagance of God's grace for us today – that we do not have to do



anything to enable or to purchase this gift of healing and forgiveness but that it is a free gift.

After this service we are going to have a time where if you want to remain behind and be anointed with oil – someone will pray with you – I invite you to name that tension that exists between your private and public life. I want to encourage you to remain behind at this rail and let someone anoint you and pray for you – that you will freely, freely accept the free gift of God's love.

And one last question – can you and I – if we are going to claim this free gift of healing for ourselves today – can we be so kind as to claim it for other people as well? Can we be so kind? Can we claim it for other people who we may consider enemies of God? Other people we may fervently believe are the least deserving of God's grace – can we claim it for them as well? Can we do that?

Thomas Merton – that great humble monk – he said this – he said – *it is my belief that we should not be too sure of having found Christ, until we have found him in the part of humanity that is most removed from our own.* In other words, we must not be too sure that we have found Christ, until we can find Christ within our enemies – within those that we severely disagree with and even disrespect.

Now can I be specific in whom I would love us to claim this healing for today?

On Friday I got a phone call – someone puts this guy in touch with me – he had written to his pastor – his pastor had ignored his communication. So he finally phoned me and these were his words. *I need to be accepted. I know Christ loves me, and his Spirit dwells within me – and I long to serve Christ in the church. I'm tired of denying who I am in order to be accepted. I'm tired of hiding in the back pew and trying to leave before the people get to know me. Because in the past, when I've allowed people to get to know me, it just takes a little bit of time for them to put two and two together, and thereafter I'm rejected and judged. I'm desperate to be part of a Church and have a sense of belonging.*

And then he asked me – *So Alan, would your community welcome me – a homosexual man?*

It was with such joy – such joy – that I could say – this place, this place will be very, very, very welcoming to you. That in this place you will find a sense of belonging like no other. Here at Calvary! In this place. Because you see, we are a people who know that we are just like Naaman.

So every other Naaman is welcome, no matter who they are – no matter who they are. Now we don't welcome the homosexual in order to change them. We don't place conditions that the Homosexual person has to change if they are going to stay. (Remember Naaman was healed but he still remained a commanding officer in the Assyrian Army! – that did not change!) Not any of that applies to anyone else for any other reason. And furthermore, nor do we welcome in order to tolerate – we welcome to celebrate – to absolutely cherish and celebrate their beautiful, beautiful lives.

It was Jean Vanier that said *to love someone is not just simply to do things for them - it's to enable them to see that they are beautiful*. So if we were to love every one in this congregation we need to love in such a way, that people would begin to see that they too are beautiful. And that's where healing comes. When we can actually be loved into believing, that I, even I, a Naaman, a sick Naaman, with such huge discrepancies from my private and public life, is beautiful.

I have a dream friends, that it won't be long before this congregation flies a wonderful rainbow flag from our notice boards outside – a rainbow of diversity – it's a symbol of the gay and lesbian community throughout the world. I want us to fly that flag from our notice boards outside – so that any person who comes past can see – here is a place where everyone regardless of one's sexual orientation is welcome – that here is a place of healing for all – that here is a place where we can be open about who are trusting that we will still be loved and accepted.

I have preached in some churches like that in America – they are called 'reconciling churches'. They are churches that have come to the conclusion that we need to be Naaman loving communities. And so they fly these rainbow flags from their doorways, inviting everyone to come in, knowing that they will be loved and welcomed.

Note: The only people who will ever be excluded from this place are people who want to exclude others – and even they will only be excluded through their own choice of not wanting to be part of a community that accepts those who they want to reject.

Please God help us to become a Naaman healing community. Amen.

## APPENDIX 2A

### Information Sheet for Participating Women

Thank you for your interest in this project about the voices of women who have wrestled with issues of 'lesbianism'. By this term I refer to those women who are, or who have at some time, been sexually attracted to other women. All terminology will be negotiated at our first group session. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not you want to participate. If you decide to participate, I thank you. If you decide to not take part, there will be no disadvantage to you, of any kind.

### The Aim of the Project

This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements for a Master degree in Practical Theology, with specialisation in Pastoral Therapy. The aims of the project are to:

- a. Explore the influence of societal, especially church, views, ideas and practices regarding female, and especially lesbian sexuality, and how these discourses have affected/informed us.
- b. Explore the relations influencing ministers, congregants and women sexually and spiritually.
- c. Co-construct with participants alternative stories, questioning societal and church views, ideas and practices that informed us, and to retell our preferred sexual and spiritual stories.

### Participants Needed for This Study

A group of 6 women who have wrestled with issues of lesbianism will be included in the group discussions, telling their stories of how they have experienced sexuality

### What Will Be Required of Participants

Should you be prepared to take part in this project, you will be asked to give consent for the information obtained during the group sessions to be used in the research project.

If you decide to take part in the project, you will be expected to attend eight fortnightly group sessions of about one and a half hours each. After each session, you will receive a summary of the session. You will be asked to make comments, corrections and/or provide feedback regarding anything related to you in the summary. All the sessions, and the report will be completed in English.

### Free Participation

You are free to withdraw from the research project at any time without any consequences to you.

### **Confidentiality.**

The information obtained during the group sessions will be discussed with my supervisor and will be used in the project. With your prior consent, the group sessions may be audiotaped. Should you choose not to have sessions on audiotape, I shall make notes during the sessions. A summary of the sessions will be available at the conclusion of the group sessions for your review. Your comments, corrections and/or feedback will be included in the final report.

The information collected during the project will be stored in a locked cupboard and will be destroyed after the conclusion of the project.

### **Results of the Study**

Results of this project may be published. At your request, details [names and places] will be distorted to ensure your anonymity. You will have the choice to use your own name or a pseudonym of your own choice.

You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish.

### **Questions of the Participants**

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact me

Rev Debbie van de Laar

Tel 849-7031

Or my Supervisor Elmarie Kotzé [D Litt et Phil] at the Institute for Therapeutic Development

Tel: 012 460 6704

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Practical Theology, Unisa and the Institute for Therapeutic Development.

## APPENDIX 2B

### Consent Form for Participation by Women

**I have read the information sheet concerning the project and I understand what the project is all about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.**

I know that:

1. My participation is entirely voluntary
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage.
3. I am aware that my personal information [including tape recordings] at conclusion of the project will be destroyed, but that any raw material that the project depends on will be retained for three years.
4. I will receive no payment or compensation for participating in the study.
5. All personal information supplied by me will remain confidential throughout the project.
6. I am aware that Debbie's supervisor will read the material.
7. I am willing to participate in this research project.

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[Signature of the participant]

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[Date]

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[Name of Participant in Capital Letters]

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[Signature of witness]

## APPENDIX 2C

### Consent Form for Release of Information by Participating Women

1. I have read the summary of the project
2. I had the opportunity to make changes to that information, including suggestions, corrections or comments to summaries pertaining to my participation.
3. I agree for my suggestions, corrections or comments to be included in the research project.
4. I have read the final summary of the discussions and agree that this is an accurate and satisfactory account of the counselling process, and I therefore give permission for this summary to be used in the research report.
5. I understand that the information during the discussions may be included in article format for publication. I also understand that should I decide that I do not wish the information to be published, I am able to withdraw my permission at any stage of participation in the project.

I hereby give my permission for information concerning myself to be used in the written report of the project and in the publication. I understand that my confidentiality will be preserved throughout the study, in the written report of the project and in the publication. I also understand that any information that may lead to my identification will not be used or included in the project report or publication.

I prefer the following name [either own name or pseudonym] be used in the research report or any other publication resulting from the project. Name to be used \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_

[Signature of participant]

\_\_\_\_\_

[Date]

\_\_\_\_\_

[Name of Participant in Capital Letters]

\_\_\_\_\_

[Signature of Witness]

